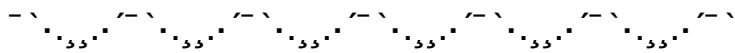


Although there was foreshadowing of this starting in book four, I feel there isn't any possibility anyone with any self-respect would marry the Ron Weasley of canon, having known far too many men such as he.

Harry had heard the rumours of her infidelity against him, but he kept up appearances for the sake of his sons and daughter. While he had wanted to name his second born son Robert Remus Potter,

after Hermione's father and Teddy's father,.Ginevra, backed by the screeching of Molly, insisted he be named Albus Severus Potter to honour the men Molly wrongly felt were most responsible for helping Harry win the war against Voldemort. So instead he had a son named after men he hated to his core, by the time this son had been born, because of the lies and deceit he endured growing up in the environment they manufactured for him.

He had relented and hoped for a third son and as many children, beyond the dozen she had promised him, as Ginevra would give him. When she announced, after the birth of his daughter, Lily Luna, she would be having no more children, Harry was crushed. He was far more devastated on Albus' seventh birthday at the lie he had to commit.



As had been custom in House Potter for ages beyond remembrance, when Albus turned seven years old, Harry and James escorted him into Harry's study, a room he had never been allowed in before. It was his father's sanctuary. He had been instructed by James to wear his finest robes and that being attuned to the family wards was a serious matter. After all, only Potters were allowed this privilege.

Harry had greeted his son formally. "Welcome, Albus Severus Potter, to the very heart of House Potter. As a Potter coming of age, do you willingly accept the responsibilities of your station?" Harry intoned.

Albus felt the words as much as heard them. Although he was only seven and knew James would take on the mantle of Lord Potter when his father passed, Albus would still have other, important, responsibilities to House Potter. He swallowed and answered, "I do willingly accept these responsibilities," with all the seriousness a seven-year-old could manage.

Harry placed the Potter mantle upon Albus' shoulders and said, "I, Harry James Potter, Lord of House Potter, do declare the acceptance of Albus Severus Potter of his rightful responsibilities, so mote it be!" When he had done this just last year with James, the entire manor had rung like a bell and the flash of magic had been visible for miles.

This time was different. Albus began screaming in agonizing pain, as if the mantle was burning into his flesh. His robes were smouldering where the mantle lay. Harry grabbed hold of the mantle and tore it off the boy's shoulders and began casting numbing charms on Albus.

He glanced up once at James and noticed the look of abject horror on his face. "James, sit down on the chesterfield," Harry ordered and watched as James complied with his instructions.

He looked down at Albus, who was still moaning in shock and looked where the mantle had been on the boy's neck, shoulders and chest. There, written in blood-red lettering chilled him to the bone, "Father: Michael Robert Corner. Mother: Ginevra Molly Dumbledore. This is no Potter." Harry tore the damaged robes from Albus' body. The words repeated over the entire area the mantle had rested, much the way the scars from the blood quill Umbridge had forced him to use in fifth year still flowed across the back of his hand.

This revelation filled him with a cold fury. He healed the boy then began weaving the lie. Albus was still in shock and had no defence against what his father did. "Obliviate!" Harry shouted, "Albus, you put the mantle on, the whole manor rang loudly like a bell and there was a bright light. Both your brother and I welcomed you once more into the family. The excitement of the moment overcame you and you told us you needed a nap," Harry said more quietly. He then cast a light stunner on the boy, repaired the boy's robes and carried him over to the chesterfield. He then knelt down in front of James, who looked at him soberly.

"He isn't my brother, is he Dad?" James asked soberly.

"Yes, Son, he is your brother and you should love him like your brother no matter what happens," Harry said a bit sadly.

"Then why, Dad? Why did he get hurt?" the boy asked.

"James, Albus is your brother. He just isn't my son. Your mother lay with another man and that man is Albus' father," Harry explained.

James' look went from one of contemplation to one of sadness. "You're going to make us forget this. That is what you already did to Albus?" James asked.

Tears escaped unbidden from Harry's eyes, "Yes, James. And I am so sorry I have to do this, but your brother deserves the protection forgetting all of this will bring."

James looked thoughtful then nodded. Harry stood to obliviate James. "Dad? Why aren't you mad at Albus about this?" James asked.

Harry looked down at his eldest and only son, "The simple answer, Son, is that it isn't Albus' fault. Obliviate!" Harry overlay the same false memories to James. "When you come of age, James, you will seek me out and ask for an explanation of Albus. I will remind you of today so the obliviation will fade. You will remember none of this until we have that conversation," Harry said and laid a now-artificially-exhausted James down on the chesterfield as well to sleep. He walked back to the desk and sat down heavily in the chair. "Turkle," Harry called out. A female elf popped into his office.

"Lord Harry be calling Turkle and Turkle come," she said.

Tiredly, Harry asked the elf to pop the boys to their bedrooms and to tuck them in and let them nap for a few hours. Turkle complied and he was alone once more.

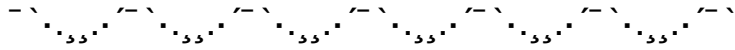
He didn't know how much later it was when James wandered into the study and pulled on his sleeve. Harry looked at his son with a small, tight smile. "Did you have a nice nap, James?" he asked.

James looked a bit out of sorts and shook his head, "I had a bad dream, Daddy. A monster was coming after Teddy, Albus and me and it was about to grab Albus. I shoved Albus ahead of me and felt the monster grab hold of my leg and pull me to the ground. I was so scared!" James said, tears forming in his eyes.

Harry knelt down and pulled James into an embrace. "It's okay, James. You're safe. The monster is dead," Harry said reassuringly.

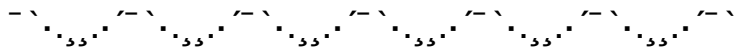
James pushed back from Harry and Harry could see the awe and surprise in James' eyes. "Really?! Daddy?! You killed the bad monster?" James asked.

Harry nodded solemnly, "Yes, James. The monster is dead," as was any affection Harry had for his wife or mother-in-law.



He remembered the day on Platform nine and three quarters. Harry looked across the platform at Hermione and could see the wariness and the slight hint of fear in her eyes. He recognised that look all too well. As a child, he had seen it enough times in the mirror to know what was happening. He also knew it had been going on for a long time from the looks of her.

It had been rumoured her marriage with Ron was far from a happy one, with the hints that Molly had used potions, and although they had children, Harry wondered whether they were intentional or accidents, knowing that Hermione had not wanted children until after she had settled into a career. What she had of a career, before their first born came along, had at first been soaring through the ranks of the Unspeakables. Then her performance began to lag. She stopped seeing him for lunch once a week. Then she abruptly stopped coming to work. Finally, she stopped replying to his owl posts. That had been when James was seven years old. The last time he saw her was on that platform, seeing James off to Hogwarts for his first year, with that sad, fear-filled smile on her face.



Harry had become an Unspeakable upon graduation from Hogwarts after claiming head of House Potter, with the Basajaunak. Harry knew, from his experience liaising with them, that "goblin" was an intentionally-insulting name witches and wizards had given to the Basajaunak, one of many sentient races whose members preferred to live mostly beneath the surface of the land.

He had gone on to get several muggle degrees from Oxford in mathematics, chemistry, and physics and put them to good use in his assigned research of reconstructing temporal displacement devices to replace the ones destroyed in the Department of Mysteries. He had begun researching the interactions of certain rune clusters and having unlimited access to the Potter and Black libraries made his work much easier.

He continued his research and experimentation, making minor breakthroughs here and there. It was slow, agonizing, and interesting work. He frequently wished Hermione was with him. He missed the girl he loved and he missed having her to talk with, to laugh with, and to bounce ideas off of and to speak to about his work. She had been the only one who could grasp some of the concepts as she, too, had a firm grounding in muggle Physics. Ginevra had never been interested in what he did and thought all of the Unspeakables, her husband included, to be rather stuffy and boring.

Four months before James was to graduate from Hogwarts and just two days after he made a key breakthrough in his research, his department head, Dennis Collins, came into his workroom and sat down in his guest chair. When he saw that Harry was at a stopping point, he cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Harry looked over and smiled, "Hello, Dennis. What brings you here? Why so glum?" he asked. Dennis was normally an all-smiles, happy fellow. Today, he wore no smile and instead looked to be on the verge of crumbling.

Dennis Collins couldn't call himself Harry's friend, but he knew things about Harry which Harry had likely never confided to anyone else. He knew about Albus' lineage. He knew about Harry's unrequited love for Hermione Weasley. This is what brought him to Harry today. "She's dead, Harry. I am so sorry," Dennis said, standing and putting his hand on Harry's shoulder.

The smile fled from Harry's face. "Who's dead, Dennis? McGonagall? She was always a sweet person..." Harry began but stopped as Dennis shook his head.

"Hermione, Harry. Weasley claims he woke up this morning and found her at the bottom of the stairs. No one in the Auror Corps believes him..." Dennis continued speaking, but Harry no longer heard him. His ears were filled with the sound of blood rushing back and forth. His heartbeat was hammering in his mind. He sat down heavily and rested his head in his hands at his desk.

He must have sat there for hours as the sun was no longer streaming in the windows and the full moon illuminated his desk.

He left the building and floo'd home. He was surprised to see Ginevra was there. "What are you doing here?" he asked in a cold voice.

"Oh, Harry, I am so sorry. I just wanted to let you know that I won't be around much for the next month. Mum floo'd and insisted I come over to the Burrow. Some sort of family tragedy, but not sure what. I am sure it is nothing of importance," she babbled, throwing some clothes into a trunk.

She finished then shrunk the trunk and walked to the fireplace. She turned around to blow him a kiss, but he was no longer in the room. She shrugged, threw the floo powder into the fireplace and was gone.

He waited until she left and severed the floo connection to the manor and changed the wards to remove Ginny and every Weasley from having access to the manor and the grounds.

For the next several weeks, he would come to work, sit down at his desk and rest his head in his hands, trying to work up the energy to further his work.

The investigation, if one could call it that, into Hermione's death was executed with as little interest as possible. After all, it was a mudblood whore who died, not a pureblood male.

So what if she had three times the amount than was considered safe of a particularly strong love potion running through her system, she was a mudblood. The contents of an unflushed loo was considered more important.

Harry was informed by the Basajaunak that Ron had been exonerated of all wrong doing by the Ministry and that Hermione's death had been ruled accidental, likely caused by excessive drinking. The Basajaunak, however, did not believe the tripe the Ministry spewed and offered to look more closely into the matter for one of their valuable clients, for a price of course. Harry waved them off. What was the point? It would be the Basajaunak versus the Ministry and the Ministry would always win the public relations game.

The Basajaunak also explained to Harry that his wife had tried contacting him several times as it seems she was not able to floo

home or apparate to the manor, and had splinched herself on the third attempt. Harry wished viciously that he could have witnessed her getting splinched.

Harry's life became a shadow of its former self. He was sitting in his office once again. It was dark, the sun having set some time ago. He was lost in the thoughts of the day he had heard the fate of his heart's true love and noticed someone was sitting across the desk from him.

He looked up at the person sitting in his guest chair, thinking it was Dennis still, "I'm sorry, Dennis, I think I was having a bad dream." His eyes continued their upward motion until they settled on two of the most perfect grey circles. He stood quickly in surprise. "Luna! What are you doing here?" He had not seen the diminutive Ravenclaw since shortly after her wedding.

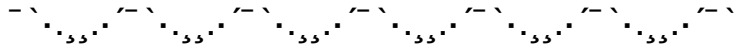
Luna stood slowly. Harry could see the tear streaks on her face in the dim light. As she began speaking, tears freely flowed down her cheeks once more, "It wasn't a dream, Harry. Our Hermione is dead. She was murdered by an enraged husband over her reaction to his infidelity. He threw her into a wall then tossed her down the stairs."

Harry stood there in shock, not wanting to believe it to be true. Hoping he was still having a terrible dream, but knew his dreams were never this vivid and were never this horrific. He stepped over to her and, hesitantly, wrapped his arms around her.

She looked up at him, still a head shorter than he. "Harry, you need to listen to me. The work you are doing," she said earnestly, "needs to be completed. When you have it done to the necessary point, use this on the rune cluster," she pulled out of his arms and lifted a necklace with a vial of crimson fluid from around her neck, "and your own blood to energise the runes. Save her, Harry. Save me. Save who you can," she finished, tears coursing down her cheeks. She kissed him needfully, passionately. She then pulled away and fled from his office.

Harry looked after the fleeing witch, "Luna?" he asked softly. "LUNA?!" he shouted after her, but she was gone. He looked at the necklace and the vial and heard her words reverberate through his mind. He put the necklace on and hid it beneath his robes and his

shirt, knowing with certainty that one failed to trust Luna at their own peril.



He enrolled Lily and Albus in Saint James School of Magic, a newly-formed boarding school which provided more structured instructions for pre-Hogwarts children. This allowed Harry to not have to worry about his children while he completed the project. He talked Neville and Susan into taking the children during the summers so they would have otherstheir own age, who were civilised, to play with, As Neville and Susan now had nine children, two of whom were at Hogwarts, and no sign of them stopping the growth of the Longbottom or Bones lines any time soon. Harry had confided in Neville about Albus' lineage

He took the next six years to complete the work on the rune cluster, eating and sleeping only when necessary. He took a final week to verify each one of the stored spells in the sequence had not degraded in the three years it had taken to cast them. The evening he completed the final tests, he made a list of things to be done.

That night, he apparated to just outside the wards at Hogwarts, walked up through the main gates and stopped at the War Memorial, naming all those who had died at the Battle for Hogwarts. He read the names and found he could still remember their faces even now.

Remus Lupin, Nymphadora Tonks, Severus Snape, Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody, Colin Creevey, Fred Weasley, Lavender Brown, Rubeus Hagrid. The Basajaunak had been responsible for determining the names of others who fell that day. Tracey Davis, Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, Blaise Zabini and Daphne Greengrass from Slytherin; Hannah Abbot, Betheney Martins, Gabrielle Bettencourt from Hufflepuff; Michael Terrington, Rosemary Harcourt, Tiffany Burgess and Robert Dugdown from Gryffindor; Beatrice Hartford, Mersibel Shinster, Marcus Godfrey and Courtney Denton from Ravenclaw; they had all fallen during the battle. All had fought alongside Harry, in the end. He walked away, back towards the gates. He was almost to them when a voice he recognized shouted out to him.

"Lord Potter! Please wait!" Headmaster McGonagall shouted to him.

He stopped, turned around and waited for her to catch up to him. "Hello, Headmistress," Harry said quietly, just a whisper above the wind. He noted she had tear streaks down her cheeks as well.

Minerva looked at him critically, "Would you join me for some tea?" she asked, each word drenched in a sombre pain.

He shook his head, still holding in his own grief for those lost that fateful day. Grief for the only woman he had ever really loved.

"I'm sorry for the loss of your friend, Lord Potter," Minerva said, barely holding her own composure.

"I am certain you knew how much you always meant to Hermione, Headmistress. She was your most devout student," Harry said. He began turning away.

"Lord Potter, since you are here, would you not like to visit with your children?" Minerva asked hesitantly, knowing Harry had not seen his children in six years.

Harry continued turning away, "No Minerva. Please take care of them for me," he said, his voice thick with emotion. He took two steps outside of the gate and disappeared without even a slight pop.

Minerva nodded to the empty space where he had stood. She thought she knew the young man better than he knew himself and didn't want to put anyone else in harm's way by providing a warning. She was certain, however, he had no intentions of seeing tomorrow.

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Harry apparated to the public apparation point at the Ministry and returned to his workroom. Based on his testing, the rune cluster was complete.

He had already picked the point in time to which he would return. All he had needed to complete the ritual was the blood of the traveller and the one thing he would never have been able to acquire himself; the ingredient Luna had given him. Unicorn blood, willing given, collected by a virgin maiden. This gift proved to him, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that, while Luna had been tortured at Malfoy Manor, the bastards hadn't raped her.

He gathered the materials, shrank them into a small trunk, left the Ministry building and apparated as close as was safe to Stonehenge, the stone circle standing upon the crossing of seven ley lines.

He cast notice-me-nots and muggle repelling charms all around the area, spiralling inward until the entire area, stones and all, was hidden from magical and muggle view. He needed the power the ley lines contained to power the ritual. He had thought his calculations were incorrect, showing the need for immeasurable amounts of power. Atop the vertex of seven ley lines would allow him to tap into the entire planetary network of magical power, if necessary, but he knew there was no way his body would survive channelling that much power.

He pulled out the shrunken trunk, expanded it once more and emptied it item by item. He placed the shrunken altar in the centre of the circle and expanded it. The altar grew to nearly fill the open space between the stones. He levitated the altar, aligned the septagram carved deeply into its top with the ley lines and set the altar back down. The septagram began to glow faintly.

He set the rune cluster in the centre of the septagram and aligned it with the intersections of the ley lines. Once it was aligned, the rune cluster began humming with the power being channelled through it.

He then removed two potion flasks and a rune-covered goblet from the trunk. He drank the contents of one of the flasks, a blood-replenishing potion of Basajaunak-manufacture, to increase the volume of his blood available for the ritual.

He poured the contents of the second flask, a milky white potion which glowed with a faint purple hue, into the goblet. This was the blood-fusing draught. Once the flask was empty, the contents of the goblet changed colour to an unnatural, sickly yellow.

He poured half the contents of the goblet into the ley line channels on the altar, attuning the altar more thoroughly with the power coming from the ley lines. He held the goblet up in both hands and focused all thought on the time and place of his return. He then drank the remaining contents of the goblet and immediately began feeling the effects of the potion on his blood and magic.

He turned his mind inward, focusing his magic on his blood, draining his core into the blood flowing through his veins. The potion made this much easier as it altered both his blood and his magic to become more compatible with one another. He could feel the blood burning within his veins with the power flowing through it.

He reached one last time into the trunk and removed the large rune-covered dagger and held it in his right hand. The runes and enchantments on the dagger prevented wounds caused with it from being healed by magical means and interrupted a witch's or wizard's magic from healing the wounds consciously or subconsciously.

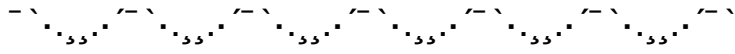
He knelt down on the alter and looked at the culmination of his life since Hogwarts. His research had indicated to him that, while time turners were limited to a maximum turn back of eight hours due to the energy required. A turn back of every hour required one point one times the amount of energy as the previous hour. A time turn back eight hours would exhaust the magic of an average witch or wizard. For him to go back to his chosen point in time was going to require astronomical amounts of energy. The only way to achieve this level of energy was to use the power of the ley lines, the conduits of the planet that converted radiant energy into magical energy and imbued witches, wizards, elves, Basajaunak and every other magical and living creature on the planet with life and energy.

He removed the necklace Luna had given him from around his neck. He carefully removed the stopper from the vial and held it in his left hand. He poured the unicorn blood into the stasis chamber in the top of the rune cluster. The humming from the rune cluster grew louder and the light coming from the entire assembly grew to a blinding crescendo.

He then took the dagger, put it against his own throat and in a voice he could no longer hear, he swore his vow. "For Hermione!"

He drew the dagger across his throat and sliced cleanly through the jugular vein. The glowing red, magically-infused blood poured out of him. He dropped the dagger and supported his weight on his arms and knees with his throat continuing to drain out into the rune cluster, which absorbed the blood and the magic within it.

Ninety-eight seconds after his blood began pouring onto the rune cluster, just before he passed out from loss of blood, his entire world exploded in a bath of bright, pure light.



As the blood was absorbed by the rune cluster, the stasis field on the unicorn blood chamber degraded, as planned, and the magically-infused blood became mixed with the highly-charged unicorn blood. This finalized the alignment of the ley lines with the rune cluster and began feeding raw magical energy from the entire planet into the rune cluster. This was like lighting a magical fuse, which would cause the power running through the ley lines to be gathered and then released, in its entirety, into a single, focused purpose.

This had the result of setting off every alarm at every Ministry or Department of Magic across the world. While those alarms were sounding, a cascade of energy was building all around the planet.

One of the reasons Harry had been unwilling to share his research with others was because everything he had read indicated the stored spell sequences, coupled with the focusing and determination runes carved into the rune cluster would cause a cascade effect on anything or anyone using the rune cluster. Once his reason for living no longer existed, he had literally nothing to lose.

If it turned out to be a fizzle, the will he left behind, written for him the day after Albus' seventh birthday, would take effect and Ginny's indiscretions would be forever sealed as long as no one in her family or lineage attempted to make claims against House Potter except those granted by the will.

As it was, his will would never be executed.

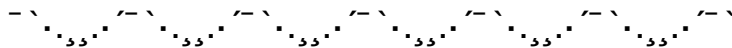
Once the stored spell sequence completed and the rune cluster finished aligning the ley line foci, energy charged the rune cluster at an unimaginable rate.

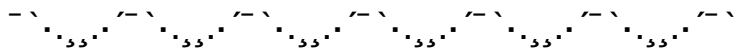
When the ley lines began draining, they pulled the magic from their surroundings, drawing magic from every living thing, the air and the earth. The only thing it could not draw energy from was Stonehenge and anything located within the stone circle.

When it had absorbed all of the life energies, the nature of the ley lines forced the very matter of the planet to be converted to magical energy in an effort to restore the power of the ley lines. This energy, too, was fed into the reaction.

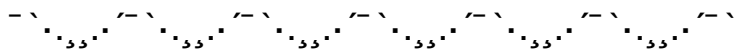
Harry had no idea the reaction he had started would literally convert everything but the stone circle he was kneeling within to magic in an effort to feed the process. Once there was nothing left to convert, the ley lines failed, releasing all of the stored magical energy into a single, focused thought.

Just before the stone circle was annihilated, Harry's essence was blown backwards through the time continuum with the force of the stored magic. The collapse of the spell converted the matter which made up the stone circle into a pulse of pure x-rays. Where once a planet had been, only a pulsing, rune-covered dagger was left behind. A short time later it, too, flashed an intense Cherenkov blue and was gone.





## Chapter One – The Return to Innocence



Harry was just coming around. He felt as if he had been struck by lightning at the same time his entire body had been beaten black and blue with a hundred beater bats. His body involuntarily twitched here and there in pain. He had never forgotten the lessons the Dursleys taught him. Wait and listen to your surroundings. Pretend to be asleep to keep the enemy unaware. Move quickly to avoid, or at least protect yourself from, the blows. Strike first, if you can, to give yourself time to get away. He kept his breathing slow and steady. It was a bit cold where his uncovered hands languished in the chill air. He could hear many people talking. The sound of their conversation seemed muffled, however it was growing louder by the moment. The pain began to subside.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone run their broom into the pitch like that before," a barely-recognizable voice said, which he now heard almost clearly.

"I saw him grab his head first and then he headed almost straight down!" someone shouted at the periphery of his hearing.

"Is he alive?" someone else called out. This voice, too, seemed familiar.

"Clear the way. Get out of my way, you dunderheads," he heard a hated voice say.

Light had begun to illuminate his eyelids, but he kept up appearances and remained still. He felt a cool hand gently touch his forehead and pull an eyelid open. He was sure his pupil dilated, but he remained unmoving until he could focus on whomever it was.

The same hated voice whispered softly, "He is unconscious. Flint! Run and get Madam Pomfrey immediately! Use your broom! You will get there faster than running! The rest of you back away!" he heard the all-too-familiar voice of Severus Snape yell. He once more felt the cool hand touch his wrist and then his throat, feeling at the carotid artery for a pulse. "Bloody Gryffindor," he heard Snape

barely mumble. He felt the cool hands gently running over his head and neck, seemingly looking for hidden injuries. The hand ran over his scar and he could feel Snape's dark mark being called by the horcrux. He felt the rush of air as Snape ripped his hand away from Harry's head as quickly as he could. "In Salazar's name, what has that old idiot done?!" Snape exclaimed quietly.

He heard the sound of a broom coming closer. "Professor!" a gruff, older boy's voice shouted, "Madam Pomfrey cannot come! Greengrass, Granger, and Clearwater were petrified!"

Harry decided now would be a perfect time to "awaken".

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Severus had taken out his wand and was about to begin casting diagnostic charms on the Boy-Who-Lived when his eyes suddenly burst wide open, seemingly looking far past Severus.

"HERMIONE!" the boy shouted in a panic, flailing with his arms, his legs moving in an uncoordinated fashion.

"Flint! Get over here and help me hold him down to keep him from injuring himself further. You! Woods! Get over here and do some good! Help hold Potter down before he injures himself worse. Bell! Inform Professor McGonagall that Mr. Potter has been injured on the Quidditch pitch," Snape said forcefully.

Harry yelled out Hermione's name a few more times, shouting "mirror" and "library" and "Penelope" as well. The two team captains had him effectively pinned to the grass so he was, for the most part, unable to move.

"Potter. Potter! HARRY!" Severus shouted. Before Snape shouted out his name, Harry had decided it might be best to appear to become lucid. He was surprised at Snape calling him by his first name, stopped struggling and focused on Snape, filling his mind with images of Hermione, as he remembered her. The beautiful, younger, intelligent little witch. He pictured her walking through the halls, looking at a mirror, seeing large luminous eyes in the mirror for only a moment, and then blackness.

"Professor Snape! We have to find Hermione!" Harry practically screamed.

A glowing silver kitten flew across the Quidditch pitch and jumped from the turf, disappearing into Snape's head. Snape blinked, then looked up harshly at both Flint and Woods, then looked back down to Harry. In a soft, almost courteous voice, he said, "Mr Potter, Miss Granger did have a mishap but she is being looked after by Madam Pomfrey, otherwise Madam Pomfrey would be here to take care of you herself. Professor McGonagall is on her way here now. Please try not to move. We don't know how badly injured you are and should you move before we can check you, you could do yourself irreversible harm."

Severus looked into the boy's eyes and watched his vision of Hermione walking through the corridors. There was something off about the vision, but he couldn't quite identify the problem. Clearly the boy was shaken by the high-speed impact with the ground and the vision of the girl seeing something in the corridor had been burned into his mind.

Harry watched as Snape looked past the top of his head. "Mr. Potter, if you promise to relax and stay laying down, I will ask Flint and Woods to let you go. Will you promise to not move?" Snape asked him.

He didn't know what to make of this almost-nice Professor Snape, but, without nodding or otherwise moving or struggling, he replied, "I promise I won't try to move, Professor Snape."

Snape nodded then looked at the two Quidditch captains meaningfully. Harry was again surprised when Flint, rather than pushing off his shoulder or wrist in an attempt to further injure him, rebalanced and put all of his weight on the balls of his feet before moving away from Harry.

"Stay still, Potter. Help is right here," Flint said to him, with a look of actual concern.

The sun was suddenly blotted out and Harry looked up into the stern face of Minerva McGonagall. "Which one of you decided it was appropriate to slam a seeker into the ground during a practice?!" McGonagall shouted.

Snape looked up at the Deputy Headmistress. "Professor McGonagall, not one of the other players on either team was anywhere near Mister Potter when he grabbed at his head, shouted out Miss Granger's name and flew nearly straight into the ground," he explained calmly, but with an angry undertone.

McGonagall looked as if she had just bitten into a particularly bitter lemon. "Mister Potter, I am going to have a house elf pop you to the infirmary. Please stay as still as possible," McGonagall said, then called out, "Mippy!" A house elf appeared next to Harry. "Mippy," McGonagall said, "please take Mr. Potter to the infirmary and place him in the bed next to Miss Granger."

The elf took careful hold of his hand and, with a soft pop, he was laying in nothing but a hospital gown on the bed between a petrified Penelope Clearwater and the love of his life. He looked at the petrified girl laying on the bed next to him and he could not help but lose his composure. "You're alive!" he whispered hoarsely, tears of joy and relief coming unbidden to his eyes.

"Yes, Mister Potter, Miss Granger is alive. She, Miss Clearwater, and Miss Greengrass were found petrified just outside the girls' lavatory on the second floor," Madam Pomfrey said, her voice laden with concern as she waved her wand over Harry. Her frown deepened as she continued casting. "Mister Potter, can you tell me what happened to you? Mister Flint claimed you flew your broom straight into the ground from a significant height."

Harry paid no attention to the mediwitch. He only had eyes for Hermione. It wasn't until Madam Pomfrey stepped between the two beds that Harry looked up at her and realised she had been speaking to him and likely asking him questions. "My apologies, Madam Pomfrey. Were you asking something?" he asked, his voice quivering slightly from the heightened emotions coursing through him.

Poppy looked down at him and took his inflection as being fear. Her features softened in an attempt to quiet his fear. "I was just concerned, Mister Potter. Mister Flint indicated you flew nearly straight into the ground from a considerable height after calling out Miss Granger's name." She sat down in a chair she had brought

from its normal place at the foot of the bed and looked at him as she reached out and held his hand.

Harry looked at her hand in shock. Never, on his first time through, had Madam Pomfrey ever shown any kind of real warmth to him he could remember. He looked up into her eyes to see the obvious concern she had for him.

Poppy squeezed his hand but continued to hold it while she spoke. "Can you recall what happened? Did you feel something or see something?" she asked.

Harry haltingly told his story and filled his Occlumency shields with the same vision he had provided to Snape, in the event Madam Pomfrey was also using Legilimency. He was pleasantly surprised when he felt no such probe.

She frowned a bit, looking lost in thought for a moment, then looked into his eyes once more, "Mister Potter, I do not know what caused you to witness what happened to your friend or what happened in the resulting broom accident, but your magical core has grown significantly since you had to regrow the bones in your arm. Your core is also growing at an accelerated rate. With your permission, I would like to discuss this with Professor Flitwick."

"Why Professor Flitwick?" Harry asked distantly, looking once again at Hermione, "Why not the Headmaster?"

Madam Pomfrey lowered her voice, "Mister Potter, while the Headmaster is a world recognized master with transfiguration, alchemy and has few contemporaries when it comes to potions and defensive spellwork, he is absolutely pants at magical physiology and healing." She paused as she had clearly finally pulled the young man's attention away from his friend as he was now openly staring at her and his eyebrows were rising through his hairline.

"While Professor Flitwick," she continued, "is a world-renowned professional duellist and has likely studied and published more works on magical physiology than any other living person. The only reason he is not practising medicine at St Mungo's is because he'd rather teach children to realise their true potential. I do know that Professor Flitwick has also taken medical classes from muggle

universities. So, with your permission..." she trailed off, hoping Harry would allow her this trust.

Harry nodded his agreement, too surprised to trust his voice. "What in Godric's name is going on here?" he asked himself.

"Good," she said in relief. She stood and walked around to the other side of the bed. She approached the head of the bed. "Please look towards Miss Granger again, Mister Potter," she instructed. Trusting her, as he had always trusted her in the past, he did so and his eyes once again rested on the source of his purpose. Poppy reached out and expertly ran her fingers over his scalp, checking for bruising and dislocation of the cranial fissures. He winced when she hit a tender spot. She drew her wand and, whispering, waved it sparingly over the tender portion of his scalp. "I imagine you may have headaches over the next few days. If you become nauseous or feel faint over the next week, you must let a professor or I know immediately, Mister Potter. I did not detect anything untoward, but sometimes injuries can be delayed in their onset. Do you understand?"

He nodded, "Yes, Madam Pomfrey," he said.

She reached into her blouse pocket and produced a small vial. She removed the stopper and handed it to Harry, "This will make you a bit drowsy and help your magic to heal your remaining injuries. Please drink it all down," she said, a motherly smile on her lips.

Harry half sat up, took the vial and threw its contents into the back of his throat to minimize the foul flavour of the potion, immediately wishing he had not done so as the headache he had suddenly tripled in force, filling him with a wave a nausea. He felt the potion slide down his throat and imagined it was adhering to the walls of his stomach. Just as suddenly as his headache had intensified, it was gone, he lay back down and stared once more at Hermione. A feeling of euphoria filled him as the potion took effect fully. "I love you, Hermione Jane Granger. I've always loved you," he whispered, just as his eyes closed and the potion unleashed his magic to repair the damage to his body.

Poppy heard his whispered words and was not at all surprised by this confession from the boy. What did cause her to take a step back and gasp, was the physical manifestation of Harry's magic as it was released and shaped by the potion. Intense, bright golden arcs of

magic flashed out and surrounded the boy in an impenetrable field of coalescing magic. There was an audible hum of energy filling the room as his magic unleashed to repair ten and a half years of malnutrition, physical abuse and to repair the most recent damage caused by driving his broom handle-first into the Quidditch pitch.

She considered calling for Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Flitwick, but hesitated a few moments as she watched the golden sphere expand and strengthen, until it surrounded the entire bed and became both too bright and too obscuring to see the boy.

She was mesmerised by the process so was startled again as the doors to the infirmary burst open when Albus and Filius, along with all of the senior staff members, came into the infirmary with their wands drawn.

Albus, Severus and Filius looked at the magical field around Harry while Minerva, Septima and Pomona looked at Poppy and lowered their wands.

Poppy was immediately relieved. "I gave him one of Severus' small healing potions and just after he fell asleep, this began," she explained.

"Did Mister Potter say anything about what happened?" Albus asked, the concern for the boy clear in his voice. "Every ward in the castle alerted us of an immense magical discharge in the infirmary," he explained further, stepping closer to the golden sphere surrounding the boy's bed. He waved his wand in the direction of the bed, a barely-audible spell upon his lips.

The reaction he received was not the one he had expected. A thick, violet arc of magic connected with a thread-thick stream of magic from the Headmaster's wand. The arc followed the thread in the blink of an eye and connected to the end of the wand, violently throwing the Headmaster back against the doors of the infirmary. Fortunately for Albus, Filius' duelling reflexes had taken over and he had a cushioning charm cast upon the doors before Albus struck them. Albus shook his head to gain his senses again. "That was," he paused a moment, looking for the right word, "unexpected." Severus reached out a hand to help Albus up.

"I would suggest you try to use passive magic, Albus. Even the obliviation squads and aurors know to not use active magic again children's hysterical magical responses," Filius chided his friend and mentor of seventy years.

Albus nodded, smoothing his robes. "You're the best we have with passive magics, Septima. Would you be willing to scan Mister Potter?" he asked.

The arithmancy professor nodded and walked closer to the boy's bed. She looked at the doors behind her then looked at Filius, who smiled and nodded before recasting the cushioning charms on the doors. She closed her eyes and whispered, "Adipiscori salutiferum," as she slowly and with great care, with her intent focused on the well-being of Harry, waved her wand in the direction of the boy. Her whisper seemed to fill the air and unnaturally reverberated from the walls.

Another thick, violet arc of magic reached out, causing the others present to react in concern for Septima. Instead of connecting to her wand, however, it stopped short and surrounded her in a sphere of violet energy. The colour of the energy changed from the intense violet to the almost angelic golden yellow surrounding Harry. The violet arc connecting the energy around Harry's bed to the now-golden sphere reduced in size until it snapped out of existence with an audible pop. The golden sphere remained around Septima for a short while before it faded to nothing.

The other staff present could not help but feel the sense of peace surrounding Septima. She had a beautiful smile on her face, her back was slightly arched backwards, her feet were together and her arms were outstretched to either side. Filius couldn't help but think she looked almost exactly like the statue of the woman he had once seen in a muggle house of worship, except for the wand in her outstretched right hand. Filius did not know the reason, but he knew it would be dangerous to approach the woman without warning her first. "Septima, are you all right?" he asked in a calm, quiet voice.

She opened her eyes and blinked several times. She then looked down at the boy's bed and smiled widely.

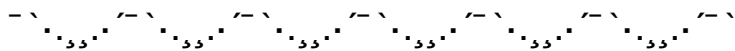
"Septima, what happened?" Minerva asked of her fellow professor in concern.

Septima looked over at Minerva and her smile faded a bit and a small frown formed on her face as she looked at Minerva. Her arms relaxed to her side and she stood up straight. She looked at Minerva for a few moments before her attention was drawn away.

"Septima? What is it?" Albus asked, hoping his arithmancy professor had not been harmed.

Septima Vector was known as a calm, reasoned, rational witch who, in over thirty years of teaching, had never lost her temper and never been heard by portraits, the castle or any of the staff, to use an expletive. She turned to Albus and her frown turned to an expression of raw hatred and disgust. Albus never saw her hand move and not even Filius moved fast enough to prevent Septima's hand from striking Albus' face hard enough to make the man stumble and his glasses fly across the room. "You BASTARD!" she screamed, then fled the infirmary in tears.

It was some minutes before anyone recovered from their shock. Pomona and Filius left the infirmary to find Septima, leaving the remaining staff behind to determine what was happening to Harry behind an impenetrable field of magic.



Septima was shaping her intent from long, specific practice in the passive arts of magic. Infusing her spell with the concern she had for all people in general, more specifically her students and most specifically the student in front of her. In addition to this conscious intent, her concern over the recent events within the school and her peripheral vision being filled with Hermione's petrified form helped focus and shape the magic as well. She closed her eyes and finished the shaping as she cast the passive form of the wellness spell. She extended her magic slowly as a wide, low-energy wave of magic. In her mind it was a sparse, nebulous fog of magic, moving towards the bed at half the speed of a slow walk. Just before her magic came in contact with an immensely powerful field of magic, it moved like lightning towards her. Instead of lashing out at her, however, it seemed to embrace her. It welcomed her as it sensed her intent to cause no harm. She knew it sensed her concern. She knew it had seen Miss Granger's petrified body in her vision. She was suddenly elsewhere. She was standing in a bathroom,

wreckage and the still-breathing body of a mountain troll covering the floor. She saw Minerva looking down at a younger Harry as she chastised him for saving the life of one of his fellow housemates.

"You should have come and fetched a professor instead of running off on your own," Minerva had said.

She witnessed the troll attacking a younger Miss Granger and Harry fighting it with no concern for his own safety. Hermione was in danger and that was all that had mattered.

She was in the courtyard when Hermione rushed past Mister Ronald Weasley and heard the hurtful, spiteful words that came out of his mouth, wounding the young Gryffindor girl to her very core, "Well it's no wonder she hasn't any friends. Bloody mental that one, if you ask me." The hatred she suddenly felt for the red-headed pillock was homicidal. Had he been standing in front of her, bound and helpless, she would have reducto'd his empty, useless head from his weak, wilted spine.

She witnessed Harry staring at Hermione as Hermione drew her wand and cast her first spell at Harry's glasses, repairing them. When he smiled at her in gratitude, the smile she saw him receive in return illuminated the entire carriage as her dimples took his breath away.

Scene after scene filled her mind of the interactions of Harry, Hermione and Ron the prat. She saw how Hermione had played down her own skills when helping Harry through the traps set around the Philosopher's Stone. She watched as Harry reached out and tore burning chunks from Quirrell's/Voldemort's face as that vile creature attacked Harry. She watched as he slipped the stone into his own pocket, where it remained even after he awoke in the infirmary and then hid it in a compartment within his trunk.

She didn't realise when it happened, but her perspective changed from a third-party observer to that of Harry. She remembered when a great oaf of a man broke his arm out of anger. She remembered a thin, horse-faced woman berating him for his mother. She remembered nearly every instance of cruelty and abuse imposed on him by the man, the woman and their fat, behemoth of a son. She remembered as the level of ridicule and cruelty had increased over the summer. She remembered his interactions with that annoying

house elf, Dobby. She remembered the idiotic ride to Hogwarts after The Prat had badgered him into coming, really only going to protect The Prat. She remembered his fear when Professor Snape had taken them into his office and called Professor McGonagall.

She remembered how his heart was breaking at seeing Hermione and the disappointed look on her face when she heard the stupid thing he had done to get to school.

Finally, she remembered looking at the petrified form of Hermione in the infirmary and the overpowering sense of relief and love he felt for her. Relief she was still alive and that he had returned to her and the sense of love for her that had started the moment he first saw her smile last year on the Express.

Interspersed with all of the visions of his memories of Hermione were odd, out-of-place memories. Memories which were much clearer but didn't, no couldn't be real. "Had he really knelt down and slit his own throat on an altar? And why was this memory so much clearer than the memories of his abuse? How would he save Luna? And why did she look so old?" Still and yet, the discordant memories were far overshadowed by his thoughts and feelings about Hermione. The entire experience had been surreal.

She felt so whole. So complete. So much more in tune with the world than she'd ever felt before. She felt the magic bid her friendship and then retreat back to its job of healing all of the physical and magical injuries which remained.

She did not know how long she stood there, revelling in the feeling of completeness when Filius' voice intruded upon her. "Septima, are you all right?" she heard him ask.

She opened her eyes and realised she was in the infirmary at Hogwarts. She blinked the after-images of Hermione's smile from her eyes and looked down at the boy, whom she could see was restfully sleeping in the bed, and smiled at him, knowing his love for the girl laying next to him was so pure. So focused.

She then heard Minerva ask, "Septima, what happened?"

She looked over at her friend and confidante of thirty-two years, her teacher for seven years before that, and she could not help the small frown which appeared on her face. How could the person she thought she knew, a person she was closer to than her own mother, effectively tell a student that he should have let his housemate die and wait for a professor to help rather than break the rules. "Do I really even know you, Minerva?" she asked herself.

Then she heard HIM dare ask her a question. "Septima, what is it?" "That meddlesome, incompetent..." she thought and then turned to him. "He sent him back to those...those...those... MUGGLES!" she thought. In one, single cohesive action, all of the anger, hatred and absolute loathing for the man manifested itself on her face as she turned. Seeing him caused her to react in a fashion even she was later surprised and ashamed of. "YOU BASTARD!" she screamed as she slapped him with everything she had, adding the force of her hips into the whipping of her arm, aiming past where his face was, following through and nearly turning herself around with the energy of the slap.

She was suddenly ashamed of herself. Not for slapping the Headmaster, but for missing all of the obvious signs Harry Potter had been abused. His gaunt, shortened body. How his skin had hung to his frame. How he cringed from attention of any kind. She couldn't contain her emotions and burst into tears. She rushed from the room, too ashamed of her own inaction to allow anyone to comfort her. She ran headlong down the stairs, out of the castle and didn't stop running until she impacted what felt like a brick wall covered in fur. She felt an immense tree trunk gently wrap around her shoulders and an enormous, calloused pillow gently patting her on the head.

"There, there now miss," the brick wall grumbled. She did not recognise the voice, but found comfort in it and continued crying herself out. Several minutes later, she heard a recognisable voice from behind.

"Oh! Thank Salazar you found her, Hagrid!" Filius shouted in relief.

"Perfessor Flitwick! Perfessor Sprout! She came hurlin' at me cryin'. I ha'n't found out e'en which 'ouse she's in yet," Hagrid replied, still comforting Septima.

"That's Professor Vector, Hagrid," Filius said, a smile appearing on his face for a moment before remembering the reasons he had had to run after the arithmancy professor.

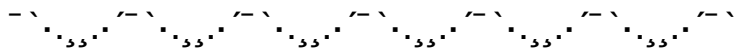
Pomona walked up behind Septima and placed her hand on Septima's back and rubbed gentle circles. "Septima, are you all right?" she asked, concern clear in her voice.

Septima gave Hagrid a squeeze, or as much of one as she was able, then looked up at the man and smiled, "Thank you, Rubeus. You are a kind and gentle soul," she said.

He looked down at her in surprise, "Well I'll be! It IS Perfessor Vector! Are you all righ' Perfessor?" Hagrid asked in concern. He'd never had a professor cry on his shoulder before. "I have a fresh pot of tea, as well as something a wee bit stronger, if the three of ya woul' like t' come 'n," he said.

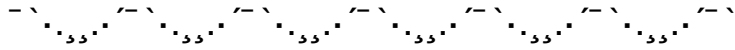
Septima looked behind her and saw Filius and Pomona were there as well. She looked back up at Hagrid, "I think I would very much like to come in for some tea and a wee dram, Rubeus. I would like that a lot," she said, giving Hagrid one last hug and letting him go.

He led the three professors into his hut. The four of them talked for some time before they all returned to the castle to speak with the Headmaster about the goings-on at Hogwarts.



Minerva stood rooted to the spot. A person she had known for thirty-nine years. A person she'd never seen angry. A person who believed physical violence was for the weak-minded. And yet something had happened within the moments she was surrounded by that golden energy. Something which had changed Septima from the quiet, contemplative, soft-spoken, demure young woman to someone who would physically lash out at the very symbol of purity and goodness in the room. The look she, herself, had received was painful to see. Never before had Minerva seen doubt or mistrust in Septima's eyes when the two of them had spoken with their eyes before. Septima's gaze today had been worse than being slapped. It felt as if, in the moment their eyes met, their decades of time spent together as friends, and more, had crumbled into nothingness, evaporating into the haze of doubt, the fog of uncertainty, and the

smoke of distrust and questionable actions. "What have I done," she practically sobbed on the inside, "to have deserved this?" She looked at the bed awash in a luminescent field of golden magic, hoping the answer to her question, and the answers to the many questions she was too afraid to ask even in her own mind, would be answered when the boy awoke.



Albus was thinking quite nearly the same words as he felt the pain and the warmth of the slap fresh on his cheek and jaw. When Septima's eyes had flared at him, his Occlumency shields were overwhelmed by the waves of hatred and anger pouring out from the younger witch. While his cheek and jaw throbbed from the impact of her hand, he was still reeling from the images she had rammed into his brain of Harry's treatment of the boy. It felt as if he had lived nine and a half year in an even more abusive environment than the boy he considered his greatest failure. The memories from the past summer were, if anything, even worse. So rapidly were they impressed upon him that he had no time to sort them as yet. His organised mind had been assailed by the nearly non-stop physical, mental and emotional abuse. And he was experiencing the abuse from the emotional state of a young boy. All of his mental buffers had been torn asunder by the onslaught of memories from young Harry. He looked over at the boy's bed, surrounded in a halo of magic he dare not attempt to examine again, much less invade. He knew from the memories he had received from Septima that the magic was immensely powerful and had provided her with an almost Pensieve-like experience of the boy's life to date. The oddity was that she had experienced most of his memories first-hand and had likely lost her sense of self within the memories. The raw anger and hatred she had unleashed upon him was clearly the boy's emotional state imprinting on the otherwise calm, peaceful professor. And that much anger coupled with that much power could devastate his plans.

Severus picked up Albus' glasses, repaired them and handed them back to him. He then turned to Poppy. "Madam Pomfrey, did you give him a draught of dreamless sleep?" he asked.

Poppy, who recovered from her shock almost as quickly as Severus, looked at the Potions Master for a moment before nodding, then shaking her head. "I gave him one of the dual-purpose potions you provided me, Severus. One of the combination healing and

dreamless sleep elixirs you had provided. Within a few moments, thirty seconds at most, he faded off to sleep and less than five seconds later, his magic manifested itself in this fashion. I was about to send for you, Professor Flitwick and the Headmaster when you all burst in," she explained. She felt she needed to qualify her statement further. "I certainly do not blame you, Severus, for today's events. I am, however, hesitant to give that elixir to anyone else whose magical core is unstable."

Both Severus and Albus looked up sharply at the mediwitch. "Unstable?" Severus quipped. He then pulled his robes back and hooked his thumbs in his belt putting on arrogant posture. "How, pray tell, was Mister Potter's magic unstable?" Severus asked, then looked expectantly at the mediwitch, a small smile appearing on his face and a quirk of his right eyebrow, arching into his hair line.

Poppy, completely aware of the posturing, explained, "The last time Mister Potter was in the Infirmary I checked the size of his magical core, as I often do when children come to see me. When I measured his core then, it was one hundred ninety three milliflamels, almost double what I would expect from a boy his age. This morning when he came in, his core measure one point ninety-six flamels and showed signs it was still growing. I..." but Poppy was cut off by Dumbledore's look of shock and Snape's outburst.

"Preposterous! Foolish woman! You misread your casting. It simply isn't possible his core is that large," the Potions Master sputtered.

Poppy Pomfrey was many things. A mediwitch. A widow. An accomplished swimmer. One thing she was not, however, was foolish, and took umbrage at being referred to as such. Her wand was in her hand, its tip glowing, and a spell on her lips before Snape could even draw his wand, much less put up a shield. Albus did not interfere because he was certain Poppy would never harm another professor. "Your core measures at six hundred seventy-two milliflamels, Severus. Would you care to disagree with my measurements?" the mediwitch asked, her wand still pointed at the Potions Master.

Severus slid his wand back into its holster but showed no fear of the woman. "No, Poppy. I would, however, wish to apologise for my words. The shock of the size of his core caused me to lose my perspective and to be insulting."

Poppy lowered her wand slowly. As her arm reached her side, it appeared as if the wand just vanished. She glowered at Snape for a few moments, then smiled. "Apology accepted, Severus." She then looked at the Headmaster. "And for what reasons would Septima have to call you a bastard, Albus?" she asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Albus looked at the bed where Harry lay and watched as the field of energy continued to obscure the boy, although the violence and intensity of the energy had not abated. "I honestly cannot say, Poppy. You can be certain I will determine that when I next speak to her."

All three of them turned to look at the sphere of magic surrounding the focus of their concerns, unaware of the titanic battle happening within the confines of the magical field.

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Similar to bottomless bags, wizarding trunks and tents, but with a very different intent, part of the creation and very existence of a Horcrux was the creation of a wizarding space. While the wizarding space for a bag or trunk had to be hospitable to the items a witch or wizard might place in them, the wizarding space used to contain a soul fragment was designed to be completely and utterly inhospitable to life in any form.

The spell to create these inhospitable spaces had originally been developed to banish demons, imps and other creatures called up from netherworlds. The soul of the summoner had to be banished along with the demon else the demon would have a link back to this world and would be able to roam freely, unrestricted by the original bindings of the summoning spell.

Twelve hundred years prior, a young witch, whose father had been performing spell development and had unintentionally called forth a demon, had discovered a means to bind the demon to only a portion of the man's soul, shearing off that portion and banishing it along with the demon. While the man had survived and was mostly intact, horrific nightmares haunted him once a month until the day he died.

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"Rubeus," Septima began, a shy smile on her face as she took his hand, or as much of his hand as she could fit, in both of hers, "I know the Headmaster has done very good things in the past, but the level of failure he has achieved with that poor boy is too great to forgive. If there was some way I could show you, I would give you a glimpse of what that brave young man has been through."

"Look at his clothing, his demeanour," said said, but could still see the doubt in their eyes. "Filius, do you still have your pensieve in your quarters?" Septima asked.

Septima and Pomona stood. When Hagrid hesitated, Septima once more smiled shyly and pulled him to stand but did not let go of her grasp of his hand. The four of them walked to the castle and went to Filius' quarters to share some memories.

He gently twirled his brandy in its snifter, much the way he had the memories in the pensieve earlier. While the memories themselves were disturbing, the aspect which caused him the greatest anxiety

was the sheer power exuding from the lad. Young Harry was likely the most powerful wizard, far out-distancing Nicholas and him combined. It was clear that something had removed the blocks he had placed on Harry's magic, for the boy's own safety he'd told himself at the time.

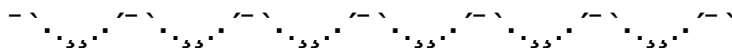
The Flamel Scale of Magical Power had been the geometrically-progressive benchmark used to measure the field strength and core development since Nicholas had invented it in 1592, using his own magical field at the time as a reference. Even now, four hundred years later, Nicholas only registered at one point two flamels.

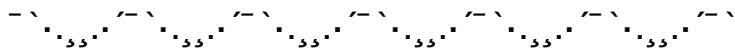
"How is this possible?" Albus asked himself. Albus, himself, only registered one point three flamels, or just slightly less than twice as powerful as Nicholas.

Based on Poppy's measurements, and she had never made an error in the past, Harry was more than four times as powerful as Albus was, and his core was still maturing.

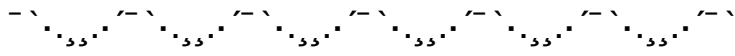
Albus looked at the clock. It was nearly time for dinner and he was still no closer to having any answers. "I think it is time to ask for some assistance," he thought, intending to contact Nicholas in the morning. "Perhaps he will have some insight."

With that thought, Albus went down to the Great Hall to preside over dinner, safe in the knowledge that dinner would be, for the most part, drama-free.





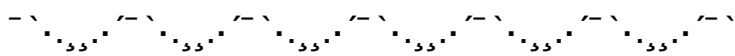
Chapter Two – The Dawn Of The First New Day



The magical field had finally extracted the soul fragment's wizarding space from Harry's forehead and then annihilated the soul fragment before destroying the wizarding space which contained it.

Had the sound of the soul fragment dying been heard by Poppy, she would have run screaming from the Infirmary, her sanity significantly compromised, as the unearthly, demonic pain of the scream would have shattered her mind. But she did not, in fact, hear it.

Instead, Harry's magical field contained and silenced the sounds and converted the energies contained within the Horcrux and the wizarding space into additional energy to repair Harry's remaining injuries, undo the damage from the years of neglect, and recharge his magical core.



Harry awoke. It was dark; only the moonlight streaming through the windows provided any illumination. He looked around and paused for a moment. "I can see clearly!" he thought, realising his spectacles were still on the bedside table. He looked over at the next bed and the sight of the young girl there took his breath away. He stared at her petrified form for some time before remembering where and when he was.

As quietly as he could, he lowered the railing on the side of the bed and slowly sat up. He listened carefully but heard no other noises. He removed his wand from the bedside table and softly cast silencing spells on the door to Madam Pomfrey's quarters, located adjacent to the students' ward. While this was by no means thorough, it was adequate for what he had in mind.

He turned and lowered his feet to the floor and padded over to where Hermione lay and took her hand in his. "Hermione. I don't know if you can hear me or not, but I've read about patients in comas being able to hear but not interact with their environment. In

the event you can hear me, I wanted you to know I am here for you. The way you've always been there for me since we met."

He took the folded page, from the library book she had nicked, from her hand and read it. "I found the results of your research, Hermione. I am going to do some additional research," he said, justifying this as not being a lie since he would be researching, from his own memories, "to see what I can do. I won't be able to take this to the professors. They would be of little assistance," he whispered.

He leaned down and kissed her gently on the cheek. "You're smart and beautiful, Hermione. Whenever I am with you, I am too embarrassed of myself to tell you how much you mean to me and how I have grown to care for you deeply. When this is over, don't be surprised when I ask you to be my girlfriend," he said, gently cupping her cheek with his hand. He then looked over at Colin Creevey, Daphne Greengrass, Penelope Clearwater and Justin Finch-Fletchley on the other side of his bed, pondering how Daphne got caught up in the basilisk's gaze.

"I have to get back to bed, Hermione, but I will be talking to you very, very soon," Harry whispered and kissed her hand. He quietly walked back to his bed, climbed in, raised the railing and tucked the folded page into his waistband. He removed the silencing spells from Madam Pomfrey's door, transfigured the glass in his spectacles to be prescription free, and once more placed his wand on the bedside table.

He lay back down and closed his eyes, falling asleep with a slight smile on his face.

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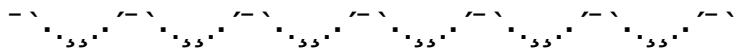
Harry awoke again. He was on his back and he turned his head to face Hermione and could not help but smile. "It really did work! I can save her!" he thought to himself, still somewhat surprised the temporal displacement had worked as well as it had.

As he recognised the sound of a quill being scraped across parchment, he turned his head the other direction and noted the low illuminating glow of a candle coming from Madam Pomfrey's office. Although he had slept most of the day and all night, he still felt

enormously fatigued and did not want to have to speak with the mediwitch just yet.

He began revising the mental list he had made of things he would change if he was successful in returning.

He turned his head once more to watch Hermione, his mind filled with happier memories of her. After some time, with his mind filled with images of Hermione, sleep embraced him once more.



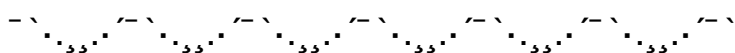
Harry was flying around the clouds on his Nimbus 2000. There was no wind and no sound. Just the silence of the sky at rest. Suddenly, as he was soaring, he faintly heard his name called in a familiar voice, "Harry." He flew in the direction he thought it had come from. He heard it again, slightly louder, but from a different direction, towards which he now flew. He heard it again. This time, the voice sounded a bit panicked, "Harry?!"

Up ahead, there was a break in the clouds. He headed towards it. Hovering in the air, a most hated figure had his arm in a choke hold around the throat of his beloved Hermione, who was crying out to him in panic and fear, "Harry! Help me!"

He locked eyes with her for a moment before his anger and his rage built almost to the breaking point. He looked at Lucius Malfoy, who smirked at him and released his choke hold on her, causing her to plummet.

Ignoring the man, he dove after Hermione. He could see she was falling faster than he was flying so he pushed all of his magic he could into the broom, accelerating rapidly towards her. Just as he had almost caught up to her, she began falling faster. She screamed his name in fear as her falling accelerated and she disappeared into the distance.

"Hermione!" he shouted.



"Hermione!" Harry shouted, sitting up in bed. Madam Pomfrey put her hands on both his shoulders and gently pushed him back down in bed.

"Harry. Shush now. You were having a bad dream," she cooed at him, trying to comfort him.

"But she was falling. I couldn't save her..." Harry began, tears of frustration and loss in his eyes.

"Miss Granger is in the bed next to you, Harry," Madam Pomfrey said soothingly.

Harry looked into her eyes, searching for the truth in them. The vision of Hermione falling had been so vivid...so real.

Poppy looked meaningfully towards Hermione's bed and he turned his head to follow her gaze. His relief was clearly evident to Poppy. He relaxed and a smile illuminated his face.

Poppy waited a few moments for Harry to turn back to her. He seemed almost enraptured by the sight of the young girl. She had seen enough schoolboy crushes to know this went beyond a mere crush. She put her hand on Harry's forehead. The coolness of her hand on his head, and the gentleness with which she touched him, caused him to turn his head back towards Poppy.

"How are you feeling this morning, Mister Potter?" Poppy asked.

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held it for almost half a minute before slowly releasing it. As he held his breath, he reached out with his magic to see if he was injured. He was somewhat startled to realise precisely how nearly perfect his body now was. He could no longer feel the density variations in his right arm, from when his uncle had broken it slamming it in a door when he was six. None of the burn scars on his forearms, from splattered bacon grease, were there any longer.

Harry looked up at Poppy with no small surprise. "What did you do? I feel better than I have ever felt," he said, a bit of awe in his voice and his eyes wide.

Poppy smiled down at him. "Do you remember what happened to you?" she asked him, watching for the small signs of emotion.

Harry wove together a tale of what he had pieced together from Snape's explanation to McGonagall and the story he had developed before coming back. He recounted the amalgam of the story back to Madam Pomfrey in a halting fashion.

Poppy listened to the story while carefully watching Harry. She was a natural reader of people and could spot a tall tale from across the Quidditch pitch. "How strange," she thought. All of Harry's physical cues were indicating he was telling the truth, but they were delayed a moment or two, as if the body was following along behind the mind in the telling.

He looked back over at Hermione, "And then I fell asleep looking at Hermione," he finished his explanation, with a small smile on his face.

Poppy produced her wand and cast her diagnostic spells, which Harry remembered all too well. He lay there quietly until she finished. He was only mildly concerned when she cast them a second and then a third time.

She looked down at him and decided to explain to him what happened. "Mr. Potter, the potion I gave you was not a normal healing potion or a normal sleeping potion. Professor Snape, who is a potions master, developed that potion as a means to allow a witch's or wizard's magic to be unleashed, as it were, to heal the body. While it has been thoroughly tested on many people and been proven to work with remarkable results, the recipient's magical core is usually somewhat depleted after performing the healing," she explained.

Harry nodded his understanding.

"I would not have given that potion to you, but for the fact that you had several hairline fractures to your skull from the accident. I was concerned there were unseen injuries and felt the risk of depleting your magical core was worth preventing the possibility of a life-long debilitation or worse," she said.

Harry swallowed and nodded, "I understand, Madam Pomfrey. I could have died from some hidden injury, correct?"

Poppy nodded, "Precisely, Mr. Potter. I would rather you not be able to cast spells for a week than allowing something preventable to happen to you."

"So I won't be able to use magic for a week?" Harry asked in feigned disappointment, not really feeling magically-depleted at the moment.

Poppy smiled at him. "Actually, Mr. Potter, there were some unexpected results of me giving you that potion. It would appear that it did not deplete your magical core. It did, however, prevent me from running diagnostics on you last evening after you fell asleep. I had to have the assistance of another professor to check on your condition," she explained, "but Professor Vector was able to determine you were healing."

Harry looked at her quizzically. "Why would she need the help of an Arithmancy professor to do diagnostic charms?" he thought. "Professor Vector?" he asked aloud.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Professor Vector is well-versed in passive magic. When your magic was unleashed by the potion, it formed a shield around your body. The Headmaster attempted to cast a normal well-being spell on you and received an unexpected result, but Professor Vector was successful using a passive form of the spell," Poppy explained.

"When will I be able to use magic again, Madam Pomfrey?" Harry asked with some concern. "How long am I going to have to remain passive? I had not expected this," he thought.

"While your core seems to be fully recharged, or nearly so, I would like you to refrain from using magic for three days and then come back and see me. I will let the staff know of this so you will be excused from classes, as appropriate," she said.

Harry nodded, but was, to Poppy's trained eye, clearly distracted. He looked over at Hermione again.

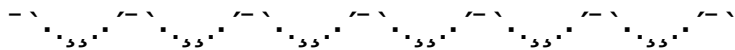
As if reading his thoughts, Poppy provided him some comfort, "Yes, Mr. Potter. You may come visit Miss Granger when you are not in

class. I do fully expect you to eat properly and get sufficient sleep or I shall ban you from the Infirmary," she scolded him gently.

He looked back at her and his smile almost melted the mediwitch's heart, "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey!" he exclaimed with genuine happiness and relief. He had not been certain how he was going to be allowed to remain at her side.

"You're most welcome, Mr. Potter. Now I will leave you to get dressed. I want you to head straight away down to the Great Hall, eat a full breakfast, get your book bag, and then you may come back and visit with Miss Granger. Take your time eating your breakfast. Eat a bit, rest a bit, then eat a bit more. It would not do for you to be ill when Miss Granger is revived, now would it?" Poppy asked with a motherly smile.

"No, Madam Pomfrey," Harry replied, "I promise I shall do as you say."



Harry was walking down to the Great Hall from the Infirmary when he saw a sight which caused his blood to boil. He rushed forward, his thoughts focusing on how he would destroy them for committing this heinous act.

Luna Lovegood was stumbling down the corridor, barely able to see. Her left eye was swollen shut from the damage caused by the fist striking her face. She wore mismatched shoes and her blanket around her as her house mates had taken her clothing and left her with nothing but the two left high-heeled shoes – shoes they had taken from one of the seventh-year muggleborns.

She was fairly certain the index finger on her left hand was broken, having tried to block the fist from striking her face. She could not move the finger and it throbbed with pain at her every effort to close her hand.

She stopped and cringed as she heard the rapid footfalls coming up behind her and her name called, fearing her tormentors had followed her and weren't satisfied with the damage they'd done earlier.

"Luna! Wait!" Harry shouted, rapidly catching up to the diminutive Ravenclaw. He watched as she stopped and cowered to the floor, seemingly trying to protect herself from being hit.

"Please just go away," she whimpered, "What ever did I do to you?" she asked, as a fat tear rolled down the right side of her face.

Harry had thought he knew what Luna had been through previously. It was clear to him she had downplayed much of her abuse at the hands of her house mates.

He reached out to her to take her hand, but noticed her index finger was stuck straight out from her hand at an odd angle. He gently took her wrist, instead, and waved his other hand over her injured hand while furiously whispering, "Oh Luna! My Luna! My Little Pixel! Who did this to you shall know my wrath."

When her hand had begun feeling better, Luna feared it was one of the Ravenclaw prefects come to hide the damage and threaten her with retribution or worse if the professors learned of her treatment.

When she heard the whispered words, she tried to open her eyes but found that, in her fear, the crying had simply helped to seal her right eye shut as well. She heard him whisper other things.

Harry's fury knew no bounds.

He examined her and healed her broken and dislocated finger, the three cracked ribs, the hairline fracture of her zygomatic bone she received when she had been punched in the face, the blisters forming on her feet and the bruises on her shins, knees, elbows, thighs, back, face and chest.

As the pain rapidly left her, she realised, since beginning Hogwarts this year, she hadn't felt this free of pain since her first week. The prefects never would heal the hidden injuries, telling her they were her reminders to stop acting so freakish.

Harry finished healing her then pulled her into a hug, kissed her forehead then held her head against his chest, making a silent promise to himself that he would not give her tormentors the mercy of death.



Luna felt warm, gentle lips on her forehead and then gentle hands pulled her head against a warm, rather firm, pillow. She opened her eyes and saw the red and gold trim of Gryffindor robes.

She pulled away suddenly, not knowing what this boy's intentions were. She didn't know if he was truly helping her or not, but she suddenly realised she was sitting in this possibly-evil boy's lap wearing nothing but a blanket. She tried to stand but the blanket slipped to the floor.

What little shred of sanity Harry had been using to hold his anger in fled when he realised they had even stolen her clothes. "Trying to take from her any shred of dignity and humanity," was his last rational thought for several minutes.

Although the castle was cold and she had been shivering before being held in Harry's lap, a warmth filled her as she felt a wave of magic wash over her.

She felt the weight of heavy wool robes fall on her shoulders, hips, back and chest. Her feet, which had fallen out of the overly-large shoes were now covered in wool socks and had properly-fitted shoes covering them. She looked down at herself and discovered she was dressed as she should properly be, down to knickers she felt helping keep her warm as well. She was also now wearing a deliciously warm, great cloak made of brilliant-white fur, lined with some type of silk.

There were the unusual adornments on the robes that caused her to wonder at his motives. First was the Potter family crest embroidered on the robes over her heart. This was usually a sign of betrothal, indicating to others who saw it that she was now under the protection of an ancient and noble house. Her robes, instead of being trimmed in just the colours of Ravenclaw house, blue and bronze, beyond these colours, the robes were trimmed in a deep, almost-black brown and an incandescent, snow-white fur. Even the blue and bronze of Ravenclaw seemed to be a richer, more vibrant hue; the blue took on the colour and brilliance of a cloudless sky at dusk and the bronze seemed to be liquid metal.

She looked at the boy before her and watched as the whites of his eyes changed to glow the same colour green as his iris. His pupils were fully dilated and his hair was blowing unnaturally. She could

feel the malignant waves of raw, unfiltered, uncontrolled rage-filled magic flow over her.

With wide eyes and a trembling throughout her body she could not control, she began backing away from this boy in front of her, hoping he would not direct his ire at her.

Watching her back away from him in abject terror was finally what it took to bring Harry away from his thoughts of retribution. "First I need to heal her mind and become her friend," he thought.

"Wait. Please. I didn't mean to frighten you," he said in a calm, soothing voice. She stopped edging away from him, though still looked as if she was about to bolt away in search of safety.

"Please. I just became angry when I saw how you had been hurt. I want to be your friend," he said.

The effort to keep from laughing in his face took every ounce of effort. "Friends? With Loony Lovegood?" she thought. "Is he just being nice to me to hurt me even worse or..." her thoughts were interrupted.

"I, too, was abused by the very people who should have befriended and loved me. Please? I really do want to be one of your best and truest friends," Harry pleaded, trying to put into the words the feelings of love and thankfulness he had for the beautiful, brilliant witch the young girl in front of him would become.

The sincerity of his words and tone caused her to pause and stand up straight. She watched as his eyes returned to a more-normal appearance.

Harry felt the weight of her gaze. He felt the slightest shadow of pressure against his occlumency shields and he pushed forth all the feelings he had for the girl who had made it possible for him to come back to save his Hermione.

Luna could feel palpable sensations of friendship, fondness and something she had only ever felt when in the presence of her parents – a deep, protective, encompassing love for her. "Do you really want to be my friend, Harry Potter?" the blond girl asked timidly.

Harry nodded and took out his wand. He saw Luna take another step back from him and looked as if she was, once more, on the verge of bolting down the corridor. Harry pointed his wand at himself, "I, Harry James Potter, do swear by my magic that I am, to the best of my knowledge, the last living Potter. By right of ancestry and conquest, I do claim Lordship of House Potter and dominion over all other houses so forsworn and so taken. So mote it be!" he exclaimed.

Harry felt the weight of House Potter's ring on his right ring finger.

"I, Lord Harry James Potter, swear upon my life and my magic that I will be a true friend to Luna Selene Lovegood to the end of my days and that I will never knowingly, through action or inaction, cause her harm. So mote it be." Harry felt the pressure of his magic judging him, his intent towards the girl in front of him. He watched in surprise as a green pulse of magic left him and washed over Luna.

Luna was surprised when Harry had said her full name. She had never told anyone her middle name. Not even her friend, Ginny Weasley. While this surprised her, nothing prepared her for what happened when Harry finished his oath.

Luna cried out in fear as the corridor-filling pulse closed the distance between the two of them, but a feeling of absolute peace filled her as the magical pulse washed over her and, although she did not know how she knew it, she knew Harry would never ever let her come to any harm. She closed her eyes, only to open them again wide in surprise. She could now feel his concern for her. His friendship for her. Her eyes opened even wider as she looked at him as she felt the overpowering love he felt for her.

Although surprised, Harry could see Luna's entire being transformed from a frightened little girl to a relaxed, happy young girl, to the expression he had seen on James' face when Harry had attuned James to the wards at Potter Manor. "How is it I can feel what she is feeling? Why is Luna feeling awe?" he thought, as he felt her feelings when he looked into her eyes.

To prove the oath had been given in good faith, as he had been taught, he focused his magic before casting. He raised his voice and cast, "Lumos!"

He was somewhat surprised when, instead of a bright, searing light being emitted from the tip of his wand, the tip of his wand glowed only slightly brighter than normal. The entire corridor, however, was illuminated with a rich, diffused golden light reminding Harry of walking through the mist on a Summer morning. And the source of the light seemed to be Luna and him.

He was about to end the spell when Luna closed the distance between them, wrapped her arms around him and buried her face into his chest. He whispered, "Nox," holstered his wand, wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes.

Harry's eyes opened widely as he could suddenly feel her fear of rejection then a wave of comfort and an intense feeling he could only surmise was relief. He decided that when she was a bit more coherent, he would ask her about it.

After several minutes of Harry holding Luna, he heard running footsteps from the direction of the Great Hall.

He watched as Padma Patil from Ravenclaw came running down the corridor from the direction of the Great Hall. The relief she felt at seeing Luna safe was clearly evident in her voice. "Oh! Thank Merlin! Luna! After what Randle had been whispering about what her and her cronies had done to you..." she had begun, but was interrupted by a pulsing wand tip held a hair's breadth from her forehead. She hadn't even seen Potter move.

"Is this one of the people who harmed you, My Luna?" Harry asked Luna softly, his eyes never leaving Padma, even after the now-frightened girl closed her eyes tightly.

His question was answered by a soft, warm hand taking his wand hand and gently pulling it away from Padma's head. "No, Harry. I made Padma promise to not tell anyone for fear they would only get worse and start taking it out on Padma as well," Luna said quietly, looking up at Harry as he looked down into her eyes.

Padma closed her eyes as the pulsing wand tip became too frightening to look at. The "Heir of Slytherin", whether it could be believed or not, looked ready to kill. Every muscle in his body, every fluid motion he had made, played back in her mind at the speed of

thought. Although she was almost fourteen, puberty had started early for both her and her sister and she could not deny this boy spoke to something primal within her.

When her logical mind had taken over, fear and death were all she saw in her future as the wand pulsed light through her now-closed eyelids before she heard Luna explain and felt the magic, that had been invading her own, gently withdraw.

Harry kissed Luna on the forehead, holstered his wand then looked back at Padma. "My apologies, Miss Patil. No offence was intended. Anyone who looks after My Luna or My Hermione for me is a friend of House Potter," Harry said with a slight bow of his head, more out of habit, as her eyes were closed and she could not see the gesture. "She was one of the ones who had simply disappeared afterwards. Her and her sister. What had become of them?" he thought. He looked at the frightened girl in front of her - a girl whom he had been seconds from cursing to madness - yet she was not one of Luna's tormentors. With her eyes clamped tightly shut and her arms locked to her sides, she looked to be on the verge of fearful collapse.

Padma opened her eyes cautiously, and saw that Potter had lowered his wand and was holding Luna with one arm. The emotions running through her had taken their toll. First the anger, fear and loathing when she had heard Randle and her clique were, in essence, bragging about having done to, "the loony little bitch," then the relief when Luna seemed to be uninjured, then seeing a wand whose purpose, held by this boy, was to kill her, or worse.

Harry watched as Padma's eyes filled with tears. She looked on the verge of fleeing in embarrassment, fear or some combination thereof. Had he been a normal twelve-year-old boy, he would have been clueless as to what to do.

Harry took a firm hold of Padma's hand and pulled her to him then pulled her head down to his shoulder. Luna once more melted against Harry's chest and began having a whispered conversation with Padma. While Harry couldn't make out every word, he knew whatever it was Luna was saying must have been working as he felt Padma relax against him, little by little, until she, too, had moulded herself against him.

He waited a minute until he felt Padma had become collected enough. "I promised Madam Pomfrey I would eat breakfast before I went back to the Infirmary to sit with Hermione and the others. Shall we go?" he asked.

Both Padma and Luna looked up at him and nodded. Both girls felt comforted by Harry's arm being around them and weren't keen on losing the physical comfort; Padma because all of the girls who had seen her rush out of the Great Hall to go check on Luna and Luna because of the physical and emotional abuse she had received at the hands of her fellow house mates.

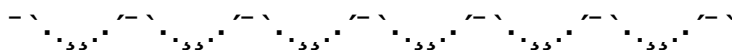
Harry sensed Luna's hesitancy so took her hand, explaining, "It will be somewhat difficult to walk to the Great Hall for breakfast if I have an arm around each of your waists." He looked at Padma and offered his other hand to her, which she took hold of with both of hers.

Harry looked at Padma and smiled. "Won't it be difficult walking sideways to breakfast?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Padma looked at Harry and blushed. "I'm a Ravenclaw, for Rowena's sake! Why does being around this boy make me so stupid?" Padma thought to herself. She struggled with the decision for a moment before she decided to just wrap herself around his arm and thought she needed an explanation. "It's cold and I left my cloak in the tower." Padma suddenly felt the weight of her clothes change. She looked down and her robes matched Luna's in fit, cut and material, down to the embroidered coat of arms over her heart. Even the great cloak now draped over her shoulders in the same brilliant-white fur as Luna's. "How did he do that?!" she thought, not so much the changing her existing robes, but conjuring these things without the use of a wand or a word of spellcraft. Her surprise was evident on her face.

Luna, seeing this, decided it looked comfortable and mirrored Padma's grip. "There we go! Now no sideways walking, Harry," Luna said then giggled.

Harry smiled at both girls then led them to the Great Hall, walking with them wrapped around his arms.



As the three entered the Great Hall, silence floated over the hall in a wave as all eyes turned to see the three children linked arm-in-arm. A small cheer went up from the Gryffindor table to see their seeker up and walking around. Several of them were getting up to escort him to a seat then stopped when he moved to sit at the Ravenclaw table.

Harry could feel Padma and Luna tighten their grip on his arms. He looked at the Gryffindor table and could see Ginny was upset. Her face was a mottled red. He knew when she was embarrassed, her face would turn a uniform shade of pink. Mottled red was a sign of deep, consuming anger she would hold on to for weeks.

Ron, too, seemed upset. His angry shout of, "Oy! Potter!" was quickly silenced by Seamus Finnigan kicking him rather firmly in the shin, causing Ron to fall sitting onto the bench once more.

Harry glanced over the Ravenclaw table and watched their faces. Several were openly curious. Six girls showed signs of anger, hatred, and of the six, two of them showed fear. "Good. Some of them are smart enough to be afraid," Harry thought as he steered the girls towards an opening on the bench.

As they passed four of the six girls, one of them harshly whispered, "Tattle tales suffer the same fate, you little wog bitch," to Padma. Padma gripped Harry's arm even harder. She almost stumbled at the venomous tone of the taunt, but her grip on Harry's arm saved her from falling.

Luna had heard Beatrice call Padma names before, but this time it had a tone of menace to it. She was walking to her seat as well when an unseen hand reached out and tripped her. She knew she should be falling, but her grip on Harry's arm had stopped her fall. She looked up at him and saw the smile on his face. She didn't know how she could feel what he was feeling, but the anger he had at her tormentors was dwarfed by the care, concern, and if she dared hope, love he had for her and Padma, it seemed. She also caught a glimpse of his feelings for his continuous companion, Hermione Granger. If Harry merely loved Luna, he worshipped the very air Hermione breathed. Still, Luna counted herself extremely lucky to have what she could have from Harry, even if, at present, it was just a true and dear friend; something she had never had before.

Harry had thought he would need to protect Padma and Luna from abuse by Ravenclaws. Calling the lovely young girl on his left arm a "wog bitch" caused him to become creative with his retribution. His anger, still at a heightened state from seeing the state Luna had been in, grew further. He continued walking until they were at the seats he had chosen. He released their hands and helped each of the girls to sit.

As he was about to seat himself, the Ravenclaw girl who'd called Padma a "wog bitch" regarded his ignoring her as a challenge and couldn't waste the opportunity so took advantage of it. "What's the matter, Gryffindork? Your little know-it-all mudblood slut can't be with you so you decided to upgrade to the loony freak and the stuck-up wog?" she said loudly enough for those around her to hear.

Harry smiled, kissed each girl on the cheek, and sat between them. "Remember, girls, I will protect you with all that I am," he said and began putting food on their plates.

Luna could feel Harry's anger reach a crescendo and then felt something else. Luna and Padma both looked at Harry as he served them.

Padma looked at the boy who, just last week, had been a short, shy introvert based on her own observations and what she knew of him from Parvati and Lavender. The boy sitting next to her, in whose company she never thought she would be in, was no longer shorter than she was, was exuding a confidence she had never seen him show before and promised to protect her no matter what. She absently fingered the embroidery over her heart. "Did something happen with his Quidditch accident that unleashed something in him?" she wondered. "Thank you, Harry," she said with a blush as he prepared a plate with no meat on it. "How does he know I'm a vegetarian? He even knows which fruits I don't like!" she thought in surprise as he prepared her plate. Padma was both smitten with and afraid of Harry as he seemed to know her far better than she knew him and they'd only just met in the hallway.

Luna was now certain Harry was not playing games with her or Padma. There were hints at it earlier – the trim of her robe she suspected was related to the Potter family crest embroidered over her heart. She knew he wasn't making demands of them or placing



claims on them, but placing it there as a warning to others. It was as if he somehow knew of the old, though still active, laws pertaining to the ancient and noble families. Harry handed her plate to her and she, too, was surprised he seemed to know all of her favourite foods, down to the flavour of syrup she preferred.

Once Harry had prepared his own plate, he was silently waiting for the "insulting bitch" as he now thought of her. It would come; it was just a matter of time.

Conversation stopped across the hall once again as Beatrice Randle gagged and then screamed loudly in disgust, as she spat her mouthful of food out across the table, onto the plates and into the faces of the three girls sitting across from her, the taste of maggots, rotting pork interlaced with sewage filled her mouth. Professor Flitwick was there almost instantly, having made his way from the head table to the place at the Ravenclaw table where Harry, Luna and Padma were sitting to inquire the change in seating for the second-year Gryffindor.

"Is there an issue, Miss Randle?" Professor Flitwick asked of his still-sputtering charge.

Beatrice turned to look at her head of house and opened her mouth to speak when the flavour of the food she had eaten caused her to empty her stomach all over the floor.

"Rupert!" Professor Flitwick called out.

Harry had been eating but could not help himself and looked over at the still-vomiting girl when the charms professor had called on a house elf.

Some house elves' appearances were hard on the eyes. The house elf that appeared was quite likely the most hideous elf Harry had ever seen. It had both boils and pock marks on its face and a great green bogie dripping from its nose.

"Professor Flitwick called Rupert?" the house elf asked in a high-pitched voice.

"Rupert, please clean this mess up from the floor," Filius said, somewhat in disgust at the way the elf pulled the dripping bogie from

its nose and wiped it on the robes of the girl sitting next to the vomiting girl.

"Rupert will have it cleaned right away!" the elf shouted, snapping his fingers several times. Just as he finished, Beatrice heaved again. "Yous needs to stop that!" Rupert said and snapped his fingers at the witch, causing her mouth to clamp shut. He then snapped his fingers several more times, cleaning up the mess once again. He then popped out.

To Beatrice's horror, she still felt the need to empty her stomach but could not open her mouth. Her mouth filled until it could hold no more.

As the girl's cheeks filled, Harry turned back to his meal, a self-satisfied smile on his face. Padma and Luna looked at Beatrice and turned away as green and grey streams shot from her nose. They leaned forward and looked at one another in front of Harry.

Beatrice panicked as the pressure in her cheeks finally found an out through her nose. The house elf popped back in, snapped his fingers three times and left. The mess was cleaned, Beatrice's mouth was open and she now had a feed pail to void her stomach into. Professor Flitwick called for another house elf to fetch Madam Pomfrey as he tried his best to keep the girl's head over the bucket. This was clearly someone's idea of a prank as he knew the girl could not have eaten this much food. Only when she drew her hair away from her face did Professor Flitwick see the word "BULLY" spelled on her forehead in neon-green, throbbing pustules.

A few short minutes later, Madam Pomfrey appeared and led the girl off to the Infirmary. Once they left, Professor Flitwick snapped his fingers in recollection of why he'd come down here in the first place and walked over to Harry.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. I am merely curious, but why did you choose to sit at the Ravenclaw table this morning?" the diminutive professor asked.

Harry put his sandwich down and, out of respect for this professor, turned his full attention to him. "Professor Flitwick, I chose to sit with my friends, Miss Luna Lovegood and Miss Padma Patil." His voice then dropped to a whisper only Filius could hear, "I would like to

discuss with you their treatment at the hands of their house mates in the privacy of your office, Sir."

The only outward sign of surprise the professor showed was a slight tightening of the eyes. "Perhaps after lunch today, Mr. Potter, if that would be acceptable," Professor Flitwick said quietly.

Harry nodded, "If Madam Pomfrey allows. as I am still in her care," he replied then sharply bowed his head to the professor. "May your vaults be lined with the gold of your enemies," Harry said formally.

Flitwick was even more surprised at the formal Basajaunak parting, "And may your battles be fought bravely, with honour and courage," the professor replied before departing to finish his meal.

Harry turned back to his meal, finishing his second sandwich and noticed the girls were done. "Shall we retire to the Infirmary?" Harry asked quietly.

Both girls nodded. Harry stood and helped each of them stand, more out of courtesy than need.

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The three of them arrived in the Infirmary to find Beatrice had continued her efforts of turning inside out even in Madam Pomfrey's care.

Madam Pomfrey noticed their arrival and, since her ministrations were doing no good with the older Ravenclaw girl, left her with the house elf and went to greet Harry and the two girls. "Did you eat a full breakfast, Mr. Potter?" Madam Pomfrey asked in a tone that indicated the things to come if he had not.

"We all did, Madam Pomfrey," Luna and Padma said in unison, then looked at one another and giggled.

Madam Pomfrey raised an eyebrow at this and fixed Harry with a gimlet stare.

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey, I ate two helpings including fruit, pancakes and two bacon sandwiches," he explained, seemingly paused in

thought then continued, "Oh! I also had some sausage. It was quite properly cooked, for sausage."

Madam Pomfrey smiled at him, "Good lad, Mr. Potter." Her gaze then took in the two girls, "And I didn't know you were friends with Miss Lovegood or Miss Patil," she said with a questioning tone.

"I just made their acquaintance on my way to breakfast. They were gracious enough to come visit Hermione with me," Harry explained, squeezing the girls' hands, looking at each of them. He then looked at the Madam Pomfrey as the girls wondered what he was trying to say with the hand squeeze.

"Madam Pomfrey, would you be so kind as to explain to Padma and Luna how the potion Professor Snape will be brewing will revive the people who have been petrified? I have no head for potions, myself," Harry explained.

Both girls listened with rapt attention to Madam Pomfrey's explanation as Harry quietly excused himself for a moment and went to speak with the "insulting bitch".

Beatrice was once more regurgitating when the rotting taste in her mouth was replaced with the flavour of mint. The sudden change caught her by surprise, as the odour of the contents of the bucket was quite revolting in comparison. She set the bucket down and looked up into the greenest eyes she had ever seen. They appeared to be glowing with power. The boy behind the eyes then spoke.

"Miss Randle. It would be best if you knew that both Miss Luna Lovegood and Miss Padma Patil are under the protection of House Potter. Were something to happen to either one of them, or in fact anyone else in Ravenclaw, this morning's experience would not end so quickly or be nearly so..." Harry paused as if looking for the right word, "enjoyable...for either you or whomever else was involved in any aggression against them. I do hope I have made the position of House Potter eminently clear." Harry said in a calm, emotionless voice.

Beatrice was no fool. She was a Ravenclaw, when all was said and done. "No incantation. No obvious sign of a wand. He really must be the Heir of Slytherin!" She nodded silently and began to apologise. "I'm sorry..." but was cut off by Harry raising his hand.

"Miss Randle. I am not the person you wronged. Please save your apology for those against whom your actions were taken and don't speak it until you are truly repentant. I'm sure that if you failed to do so, your magic might once more act against your behaviour and demonstrate to all your true intentions," Harry explained, then stood and moved to turn, seeing the girl simply nod at him before he walked to Hermione's bed.

Beatrice was nervous. "He was clearly responsible for what happened to me, but he didn't use his wand so there is no proof," she thought, "and he did make it stop. Oh but how can I apologise sincerely to that little wog tramp and that loony little freak?" she thought, as an ill odour once again filled her nostrils. She whimpered and thought about what it would take to genuinely apologise to the two of them and the odour vanished to be replaced with the scent of mint for a few moments. Her eyes watched the boy as he sat down next to his incorrectly-sorted Ravenclaw girlfriend, as the older Ravenclaws referred to Hermione Granger.

Harry sat down and took Hermione's hand. "Hello, My Hermione. I've made some new friends today and will introduce them to you as soon as they have finished speaking with Madam Pomfrey." He then went on to describe his breakfast, raising his voice to ensure Colin, Justin, Penelope, and Daphne could hear him as well.

"The girl lays there petrified, but he's talking to her as if she were listening. Almost like Mum at Daddy's grave," Beatrice thought, and then realised in surprise that, from his words, Harry seemed to believe the petrified girl could hear him and he was trying to be courteous to the others who were petrified by speaking loudly enough for them all to hear.

She watched as Padma and Luna walked over to join Harry. As her thoughts turned darkly, she felt a stinging sensation on her forehead and the taste of bile filling her mouth. She closed her eyes and focused on the mental exercises her mother had taught her when tutoring her in the use of magic when she was five years old. She repeated the words, "They are intelligent girls. I am truly sorry for what I did. They are nice girls. I am sorry for what I did. They didn't do anything wrong. They are pretty girls. I am sorry for what I did. It was my doing which caused this problem." She repeated this over and over in her mind. Almost immediately after the first mental

repetition, the flavour of mint lightly filled her mouth and the sensations of cool fingers swept over her forehead. She continued this mantra, repeating it for the next several minutes.

Beatrice was surprised when she heard Madam Pomfrey's calm, concerned voice, "Miss Randle, I must say you look as if you're feeling better." She combed Beatrice's hair away from her forehead and noticed even the pustules were gone.

"I am feeling better, Madam Pomfrey. If I may be excused, I wish to speak with Professor Flitwick," Beatrice replied, her eyes staring at Madam Pomfrey's shoes.

Madam Pomfrey cast several diagnostic spells on the girl but could find nothing untoward. "Very well. If you have any recurrence of the symptoms or feel anything else is out of sort, please do not hesitate to come to me directly or speak with a professor or your head of house," Madam Pomfrey said with concern.

Beatrice hopped to her feet, clearly in a rush to get out of the Infirmary. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey! I hope to have no repeat of this again!" the young girl said hurriedly as she rushed from the Infirmary.

Poppy watched her go, shaking her head and smiling. "Always in such a rush, these young ones are!" She then looked over at Harry, holding Hermione's hand and talking in a normal tone of voice, and the two girls who seemed to be hovering around him, each having a hand on one of his shoulders. "Interesting – if Harry were a few years older, I think he would be courting all three of these girls," she thought, then looked once more over the beds holding the petrified students, especially focusing on the three petrified girls. "Or all five of the girls – they are all quite lovely," she thought, thinking of her late husband and wishing they had had enough time together to have sons and daughters. She watched Harry and his friends a few moments longer before retiring to her office to continue working on her research project, she was sharing with Madam Pince, to determine what could cause wizards and witches to be petrified.

Harry had somewhat gotten lost in his one-sided conversation with Hermione when a warm hand touched his knee. He looked up, somewhat startled, into two honey-coloured orbs.

"Harry," Padma said, having finally worked up the courage to interrupt him. She waited for him to recognize her then continued. "You do know that people who are petrified cannot hear you," she said with some concern as Harry focused on her, an intense set to his face.

He suddenly relaxed into a smile and took her hand in his. "Padma, and you too, Luna," he said, looking over at Luna and taking her hand with his other, "could you go to your dorms and get your book bags then stop in at the Gryffindor dorms and ask Parvati to get one of the lads - Seamus or Dean possibly – to get my book bag and the three of us can study here today. As to people who are petrified being unable to hear us, how do we know that, and if we have no proof, what harm could it do to speak to them while they are petrified?"

"But Harry..." Padma began but was cut off by Harry lifting her hand to his lips and kissing it.

"Padma, how would you feel if, while petrified, you could still hear, still think, still feel and yet no one ever came to talk with you? To hold your hand? To let you know that you were not forgotten? To let you know someone loved you enough to take their time to ensure your mind was stimulated..." Harry paused suddenly and got a far-away look and snapped his fingers. "If you could go to the Library or ask Parvati if Hermione has any Jane Austen books in her bookcase or in the Library so I may read to her and our friends," Harry said, looking at Padma searchingly.

Padma had watched boys looking at her and her sisters before, but Harry was looking at her with an intensity she had never seen in anyone before. She nodded. Harry stood and gently pulled her to her feet and kissed her on her cheek. He then did the same to Luna. When both girls were standing, he pulled them into a hug then kissed them on their foreheads. "What just happened?" Padma asked herself, but relishing the warmth and feeling of the embrace.

Luna was surprised as well. She could feel, almost tangibly, Harry's affection for her and, it seemed, Padma as well. She also felt a

sense of certainty from him, as if he knew exactly what to do. His words and gestures weren't calculated. It seemed he knew what needed to be done moments or longer beforehand. She had experiences in the past of seeing possible futures, but nothing so spontaneous or flowing as what she was experiencing with Harry.

Both girls' jaws dropped when he released them from the hug and said simply, "The password for Gryffindor Tower is 'Mandrake Screams'. I love you two. Thank you for doing this for me." They both left the Infirmary somewhat in a daze, heading towards the Gryffindor tower.

After the girls left, Harry looked over at Penelope Clearwater and Daphne Greengrass. "How is Greengrass involved in this, this time around? How was she anywhere near My Hermione?" he wondered. He walked over to Colin's bed and spoke softly to the younger boy, "Colin, Harry here. I won't let you lay here, forgotten about, Colin, but I want to speak with you frankly. I would like you to be my friend. At the moment, you seem to see me as something much more than I am."

"If, when you are revived, we could sit down and talk quietly, we can get to know one another better. I know, being a muggleborn, much as it is for me being muggle-raised, the wizarding world can be a bit overwhelming, when you feel yourself getting overly excited, just pause, take a few deep breaths and try to remember it's all a bit overwhelming to me as well."

"I would like to have a little brother, having never had any brothers or sisters when I was growing up, and I would like you to be one of my little brothers. If that would be okay with you, let me know."

"I don't mean to be mean or cruel or to hurt your feelings. I just get uncomfortable when I'm walking down the hall and you shout out my name and snap a picture. I'd rather you get to know the real me and for you to be someone I can count on and someone I can trust."

"I won't forget about you or dismiss you out of hand, but I think both of us would enjoy a calmer, brotherly relationship with one another."

Harry squeezed the boy's hand and walked back over to the space between Daphne's and Penelope's beds. He sat down and took one of their hands in one of his.

"Ms. Greengrass, Ms. Clearwater. I don't know how the two of you managed to get petrified with My Hermione, but I imagine you were helping her with her search for information. If, as I believe is the case, this is true, know I am indebted to you and appreciate your efforts. They have not been for naught."

"I also will not forget the two of you and will try to have your friends come to speak to you while you are in this condition. It is my belief you can hear me and can feel me holding your hands. I just wanted you to know I have not forgotten you," Harry explained, squeezed their hands and stood once again.

He went around to Justin's bed and put his hand on Justin's shoulder. "Justin, I will try to get your friends to visit you as well. I don't know you very well, but you are sharing this adventure with My Hermione and perhaps that is the spark that will allow us to be friends. I hope you now know that I was not responsible for what happened to you."

"Considering my mother was muggleborn as well, and that I find the entire concept of blood purity to be utter tripe, I would be utterly against anyone harming muggleborns," Harry explained.

"I will do what I can to keep you and the others from going starkers, in the event you can actually hear what I am saying. I know I would simply go mad if all I could do was stare open-eyed at the ceiling," he said. Harry squeezed Justin's shoulder and looked over at the object of his affection.

He walked back over to Hermione's bed and was about to sit down once again when the window above the Infirmary door hinged open and a tawny owl flew in. Harry recognized the breed of the owl immediately, as it was the breed of owl Gringott's Wizarding Bank used for sending discrete messages to their more-important clients.

He held his arm up as the owl landed. He removed the letter from its leg and apologised for having no owl treats available. The owl waited a few moments, staring at Harry, before taking flight once more and leaving through the window above the door.

Harry noted it was addressed to

Harry James Potter

In front of chair between Beds 13 and 14

The Infirmary

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry was taken aback at the precise location listed upon the envelope. He turned it over, broke the wax seal, removed the folded piece of parchment, and read it.

Lord Potter,

Our scryers have just discovered your whereabouts.

Some discrepancies and oversights with your accounts and your inheritances have been brought to our attention. We wish to meet with you at your earliest convenience and shall await your reply. Due to some recent changes with Ministry law, this should be considered a matter of utmost importance.

Respectfully,

Steelgrip

Senior Manager of Special Accounts

Harry knew who Steelgrip was. He had, however, not met him until sixth year previously, and legislation passed by the Wizangamot had stripped him of most of House Potter's and House Black's wealth and placed it firmly in the hands of "former" Death Eaters. He would not allow this to happen again, but he'd not received a letter from Gringott's in the first time through. "What else has changed?" he wondered absently.

A loud bark brought him to awareness again. Tears came unbidden to his eyes as a graceful and beautiful snowy owl flew through the window over the door and landed on Harry's waiting arm. "Hedwig!" Harry whispered reverently, looking longingly at his first and only familiar. When he had lost Hedwig, the tearing of his heart and the memories of her bravery and courage prevented him from ever wanting another familiar.

Hedwig landed on his arm, knowing her fledgling needed her, even though her bond to him had somehow become tenuous, his need was great enough to let her know where he was. She stared at him then closed her eyes and gathered together the feelings of need, belonging, and connection. She opened her eyes and pushed these feelings out to him, much as she had done only a short while ago when she had first been united with him.

Even through his tear-stained eyes, he could see the intense blue flash come from Hedwig. This unleashed yet another wave of memories and yet another bout of happy tears. He heard her bark at him several times and he thought he was losing his mind.

"What is this water from your eyes? Are your eyes that dirty? I feel your happiness and your sadness, but now is not the time. We have things to do. Fledglings to awaken. A parliament to restore. We do not have time for you to wash your eyes over and over again," he thought he heard when he listened to the barks.

Harry shook his head, reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out an ever-inking quill and a folded piece of parchment. Hedwig hopped from his arm and took a short flight to the brass headboard of Hermione's bed and watched intently as Harry quilled a letter.

Steelgrip,

Sir, I can make time today to meet with you if you can provide me with transportation to and from Gringott's. The owl who delivered this missive will wait for your reply.

Lord Harry James Potter

Harry folded the parchment and carefully tied it to Hedwig's leg. She flared her wings and hopped to his arm. She affectionately nipped his fingers before taking flight out through the window. Through the window, he saw a flash and heard a soft whoosh.

Harry asked Madam Pomfrey for the loan of an Ever-Inking quill and a piece of parchment. He sat and wrote out his list for Gringott's. When he finished committing it to parchment and ink, he folded it and placed it in his pocket.

He moved and sat down next to Hermione's bed and once more took her hand in both of his and gently stroked her hand and wrist. "Hello, My Hermione. I didn't tell you before, but I have taken up the mantle of Head of House Potter and just received a missive from Gringott's. I anticipate I will be leaving here shortly, but I will return to your side to ensure you're taken care of and your mind kept active."

He spoke to Hermione and the others for several minutes before Hedwig flew back through the window and landed on the headboard. Harry released his hold on Hermione's hand and stood and took the envelope from Hedwig, who had dutifully put her leg out.

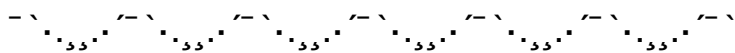
Lord Potter,

If you tap your wand against this parchment and say 'I trust Guilder Gringott', you will be taken to a private waiting area where you will be met shortly after your arrival. You must be outside of the wards of Hogwarts or the parchment will simply burn.

We await your arrival,

Steelgrip

Harry leaned down and kissed Hermione's forehead. "I have to go, My Hermione. I will be back as quickly as I can be, but two people, whom I hope you will come to trust as much as I do, will come to talk with you in my absence. If something untoward happens to me, which I do not expect to happen, I want you to know I love you with everything that I am, was and ever will be. So say I, Harry, Lord of House Potter. So mote it be," he said, causing a pulse of green light to wash over Hermione's bed. He wondered, for a moment, if this was what had happened to Luna, but felt he had no time to waste. He left the Infirmary, heading for a particular statue.



Luna recovered first, and pulled Padma into an alcove. "Padma, I know I heard what he said and I know he spoke the truth," Luna said earnestly to the older Ravenclaw.

Padma, having been lost in thought since leaving the Infirmary, looked at Luna. "But how can he love us? He's only known us for two hours!" Padma exclaimed incredulously, tearing her hands away from the blonde girl.

The fear in Luna's eyes was evident. "I don't know how I know. Ever since he met me in the corridor, I have been able to feel what he is feeling. It scares me. I've read about things like this in some stories, but those were just stories. This is real and it frightens me as much as it makes me feel happy, loved and..." Luna said, wringing her hands.

Padma realized Luna was even more frightened and concerned than she was. She wrapped her hands around Luna's and pulled her into a hug. "Everything is going to be all right, Luna. I don't know why, but I trust Harry. When he hugged us earlier, I've never felt safer or more cared about in my whole life and it is scaring me, too!" Padma explained, trying to keep the panic out of her voice as these previously-unknown feelings flooded through her.

Luna more than simply watched, she fully experienced, a flood of images that washed over her. In one path, Padma went to Gryffindor by herself and was involved in a spell-firing fight before she had been allowed to say more than a dozen words. Luna's perspective suddenly switched to the Ravenclaw common room and saw Beatrice Randle huddled in a corner crying, as spellfire reflected from her horrified eyes and agonizing screams filled the air, then there was nothing but indeterminate grey fog.

In the other path, she watched Padma and her sister, Parvati, being held in a hug by Harry.

Padma was looking at the silent girl. "Fine. You go to our dorms and get our book bags. I will go to Gryffindor and talk with Parv," Padma said, releasing her hug and heading down the corridor.

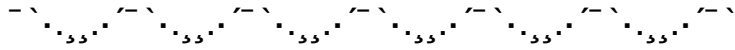
Luna shook herself and ran after Padma. "No! Padma! Wait up!" she cried loudly.

Padma stopped at the base of the stairs. "What?" she asked harshly.

The tone didn't even phase Luna – she knew what had happened and Padma thought she was ignoring her or dismissing her. "I'm

sorry. I wasn't ignoring you. The situation is just so far beyond what I am able to cope with. I'm coming with you. While it is only the two of us, we'll have safety in numbers," Luna explained.

Padma's frown transformed into a relieved smile. She took Luna's hand and the two of them walked to Gryffindor Tower.



Parvati had been talking to Lavender about the latest Teen Witch Weekly when she caught a familiar face walk through the portrait. "How did Padma get in here?! Something must be wrong! But who gave her the password?!" "Excuse me, Lav. That's my sister," she said as she watched several house mates challenge the unescorted entry of the two Ravenclaws and her sister cutting them off at the knees with her tongue.

"...none of your concern Weasley," Padma said, "If you have need for an explanation, perhaps you should discuss it with our mutual heads of house," she finished, spotting Parvati coming over.

"My Sister," Parvati said with concern, also looking Luna over, noting that both Padma's and Luna's robes were trimmed in Ravenclaw colours and two other colours surrounding them. She then saw the Potter coat of arms on Padma's robes over her heart and Parvati's eyes grew wide.

"Sister, we need to speak with you regarding a family matter of some importance. Is there somewhere we can speak privately?" Padma asked softly, crossing her arms in front of her and sounding to the people now surrounding them as if it was a formal matter.

Parvati's eyes flared open further in surprise for a moment. While the tone of Padma's voice was only for show, crossing her arms in front of her, with her middle and index fingers on both hands crossed as well, meant this really was a closed discussion.

Parvati has more questions than before but didn't ant to hear those answers in the common room. "Let us retire to our dorm," she replied in the same tone, directing Padma and Luna towards the stairs and motioning to Lavender to follow them. The four girls felt the weight of dozens of eyes following them up the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Once they entered the room Lavender and Parvati shared with Hermione and three other second year girls, Parvati made sure they were alone and closed the door. "Here," she said.

Padma and Parvati began casting spells at the walls, ceiling, floor and the door. Once the spells were all cast, the two girls faced the other and held one another's hands with their arms crossed. They chanted for half a minute. When they were done, the walls, ceiling and floor flashed white while the door flashed red.

"That should provide us an adequate level of privacy," Parvati said, looking at the surprised expression on Lavender's face and the respectful expression on Luna's face.

"What were those spells? Where did you learn that? Aren't those auror-level spells? What else do you know you haven't told me about?" Lavender asked of Parvati in a single breath, a betrayed expression on her face.

Parvati looked at Padma, who nodded.

Parvati looked at Lavender. "Lavender, you are here right now because you are my best friend. Because of this, you have a choice: We can have this discussion and we can use spells to make you forget everything said here," Parvati held her hand up as it appeared Lavender was about to interrupt, "This would not be my preferred solution, but this is a family matter. The second choice is that you take a witch's oath to hold all we speak of in confidence. The way this particular oath works is that you won't even be tempted to speak of our discussion to anyone. You won't want to, you cannot be coerced into talking about it and even mind magics cannot disclose the information, but you will still know it and remember it when you want to, in the most minute detail."

Lavender was looking at Parvati open-mouthed, without a sound coming from her.

Parvati reached out and took Lavender's hand, "Lav, you have to decide now. I'm sorry I couldn't give you another choice, but I have my reasons and they're good ones. I need you to trust me," she pleaded.

Parvati had been Lavender 's best friend since they met on the Express the first year. She was surprised and awed by the magic Parvati and her twin sister had cast, but this...this choice. "Well, there really was no choice," Lavender thought. "What is the wording of this witch's oath?" she asked, slowly removing her wand from her robes to say the oath.

Padma then looked at Luna and reached out and took her hand, "Luna, I know I can trust you, but all four of us should take this oath," she explained.

Luna recognized the power required for the magic, and realised Padma and Parvati could only perform the magic because somehow their magical cores were synchronized – something exceedingly rare, even in twins. To hide the information from mind magics was something she would want to learn to do. She nodded, looking back and forth between the three other witches. "I agree, what do we need to do?" Luna's face suddenly paled and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh Harry! I am so sorry!" she sobbed.

"What is it, Luna? What about Harry?" Padma asked, cradling Luna's head to her chest.

"He's only now realised what he's done," Luna said haltingly. Padma raised an eyebrow.

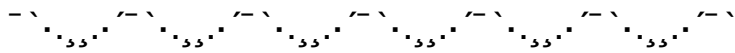
Luna looked up into Padma's eyes, two tears running down her cheeks, and pushed away from Padma, all too clearly projecting a false sense of cheer. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes, "what do we need to do?"

The other three girls looked at one another then looked at Luna, who just shrugged and explained, "It's one of those pieces of information we need to hide."

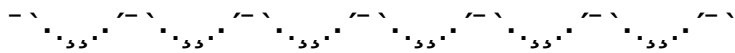
The four girls began their work.

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### Chapter Three – A Trip To Gringott's



Harry found the statue of the humpback, one-eyed witch and entered the tunnel leading to Honeydukes in Hogsmeade. Once outside the Hogwarts' wards, Harry activated the portkey.

He arrived in the lobby, and immediately walked to the Concierge's desk.

The basajaun at the desk, Flintaxe, looked up as he saw motion in the lobby and touched a disc on the underside of his desk to alert the security staff. He was aware Steelgrip, the senior manager of Special Accounts, was expecting a most-important visitor to the bank today. The visitor would need to be most-important, indeed, for him to be at his desk on a day the bank was closed to the public.

Flintaxe watched the human approach with interest. The human appeared to be a boy, but carried himself as if he were royalty, walking alertly and taking in his surroundings, seeing everything in the lobby, missing nothing. Flintaxe knew pureblood wizards who would trade their eldest sons into slavery to hold themselves with such composure.

Harry arrived at the desk, noting the basajaun sitting there was openly watching him approach. Harry, directing the concierge's attention to the letter in his hand, explained, "Sir, I received this missive, from Steelgrip, in which he indicated he wished to meet with me as soon as possible. I present myself to be taken to him so we may discuss this and other business."

The concierge stood. "We have been expecting you, young sir. These two members of our security staff will escort you to the waiting area where you will meet with Steelgrip."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, then turned to see two of the largest basajaunaks he'd ever seen. They were a head taller than he was and appeared to be pillars of solid muscle-on-muscle. They appeared to be identical twins. Each had a two-handed sword

strapped on their backs and spears which could double as ballista bolts.

The one on the left spoke, surprising Harry with the mildness of his voice. "Sir, if you would come with us."

Harry nodded and walked between the two through a maze of corridors and stairways leading down. They came to a plain, unremarkable door. One of the guards knocked and opened the door, "Senior Manager, your guest has arrived," he stated formally, gesturing for Harry to wait.

"Please have him enter," a deep voice boomed from within the room.

The guard gestured for him to enter and closed the door behind him. The basajaun Harry saw in the room, while five years younger than he remembered from his first time around, was still old. "Senior Manager Steelgrip," Harry said in near-perfect Basajaunese warrior dialect, paused a moment then bowed deeply, closed his eyes, held his arms outstretched, palms up and fingers splayed open to indicate the level of trust he had in the basajaun. Harry counted to ten before standing up once more and looking at Steelgrip.

Steelgrip knew he should have expected unusual things from a normal-raised twelve-year-old boy who used the magical oath of succession to claim his rightful role as head of his house. He had not, however, expected the boy to know anything of Basajaunak customs or rituals, much less the dialect of the Basajaunak warrior class.

Steelgrip smiled at who he now considered a young man. "I will not inflict one of our languages on your throat. Thank you for coming, Lord Potter," he said, then bowed slightly, his eyes never leaving the boy. When he raised his head again, he gestured for Harry to sit in the chair which appeared behind him.

Unlike the way average lords or ladies of a House were usually treated, Harry noted something was very different with the Basajaunak this time through. A low table appeared in front of Harry and Steelgrip was sitting in an identical chair to his across from the table. Upon the table was a jet black obsidian knife with a handle made from some type of bone; a wide-mouthed, transparent, rune-

covered decanter; an enchanted quill; and a stack of parchment Harry presumed was succession parchment.

Steelgrip explained the items. "These are the items and materials required for the Rites of Succession," he said, pointing at each item. "This is an obsidian knife with the finger joint of a Hungarian Horntail dragon as a hilt. In our language, we refer to this dragon as, roughly translated into English, Flying Death. Obsidian is one of the naturally sharpest materials known. The enhancements upon the blade and hilt prevent the wielder from using it to do harm to others, from doing undue harm to themselves and essentially prevents it from being used for any nefarious purpose. Should you wish to complete these rites, you will use this knife to cut yourself with the intent to let blood flow into the decanter."

Steelgrip directed Harry's attention to the decanter. "The decanter," he explained, "as you can see, has a number of runes carved into it. These ensure the blood was provided willingly, without coercion or force. They also ensure the blood matches the magical signature of the heir. The runes also perform the lineage tracing required to determine the families for which the heir is in line of succession."

"Once the decanter has the required volume of blood, the blood will turn gold," Steelgrip explained, then pointed to two rune clusters near the top of the decanter. "These runes will cause the wound you made to provide the blood to heal." Steelgrip raised his attention to Harry. "Do you have any questions so far?" he asked.

"No sir," Harry replied.

"Very well, then. Once the blood turns gold and the wound is healed, the heir picks up the quill in their wand hand. This attunes the quill to the heir's magical signature. The heir then places the quill within the decanter. The feather will absorb all of the ink in the container and float over this parchment," Steelgrip explained, directing Harry's attention to the short stack of parchment.

"The parchment is enchanted such that it will only accept the ink from these rites. Should any other ink be used to write upon the parchment, it shall leave no mark nor indentation in the page. Further, if it is the heir who writes upon the parchment with the intent of falsifying the record of succession, the rites will be forfeit for lack of an heir. Do you understand?" Steelgrip asked seriously.

"I believe so. If the heir attempts to falsify the document, the heir dies." Harry replied questioningly.

"Very good, sir. You wouldn't believe the number of pureblood boys we have had to explain that to slowly, using small words," Steelgrip said with a small laugh, which Harry shared.

"Finally, once the pages are covered, a copy of the document is automatically filed in six separate vaults within Gringott's and is filed at the Ministry. A copy can also be sent to the heir's solicitor for a fee. Do you have a solicitor, Lord Potter?" Steelgrip asked.

"I do not. Do you have a recommendation for one who has the willingness and the capacity to manage any complications which may arise with House Potter?" Harry asked, unsure how complicated House Potter was going to be with its wealth intact.

"While your parents' wills were drawn up by Bartharrow and Martins, both of those fine gentlemen were murdered just two days before you received that scar on your forehead," Steelgrip explained. "We have three solicitors who are readily familiar with both the normal and magical worlds and, of those three, Wilkinson, Wilkinson, Williams and Smythe is the most adept at handling the more complex issues when the two worlds come in contact; something House Potter and, if my suspicions are correct, the other Houses for whom you are heir will need."

"Other houses?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing in anger. "What did that meddling old fool do now?!" Harry thought.

Steelgrip waved to the table, "Would you care to see over which houses you hold sway for certain?"

Harry answered by nodding then reaching over and picking up the obsidian knife with his left hand. He placed the sharp edge of the blade against his right palm and, over the decanter, clenched his teeth, closed his right fist tightly around the blade, forcing the blade to cut deeply into his palm. He then drew the blade out rapidly, slicing his hand to the bone. A not-entirely muffled grimace of pain escaped his tightly-closed lips as blood poured from the wound.

It took only a minute for the decanter to fill, Harry judged, three-quarters before the blood within flashed gold and for the runes on the outside to flash nearly the same colour green as his eyes. The rivulet of blood from his hand stopped immediately.

Harry was, however, unprepared for the pain and nearly bit through his cheek at the searing, flesh-burning agony of his wand hand. It felt as if his hand had been submersed in liquid fire as the wound was first magically cauterised and then, as it healed, a sanity-breaking, bone-deep itch built in his palm. The itch, too, went away, but the droplets of perspiration falling from his forehead, due to the stress of the past few minutes, lent credence to his mind that the pain had not been imagined. He opened his hand and watched as the last of the pale white line from the cut disappeared in the same direction in which he had drawn the knife. Before his eyes, it was gone and his fully-healed hand filled his gaze.

"My apologies, My Lord. I should have warned you of the power of the healing capacity," Steelgrip explained, genuinely contrite.

"It is of no consequence," Harry said, noting the blood which had adhered to the blade had been absorbed by the magic of the obsidian.

"Now, if you would place the quill into the decanter, My Lord," Steelgrip said, in the event Harry, as so many men had done previously, had forgotten to do so.

Harry lifted the quill and lowered it carefully into the decanter, watching as it sank and began absorbing the now-golden blood. Once the blood had all been absorbed, the quill floated out of the decanter and moved over the stack of parchment.

With a small spark as the quill touched down, it began writing in a beautiful, small script. Harry watched in fascination for a few moments. He looked up at Steelgrip, who was intently watching the decanter as the runes carved into it glowed a brighter and brighter blue.

Steelgrip, feeling Harry's gaze upon him, explained, "Only in legend has the Decanter of the Heir glowed after its part of the ceremony," the awe in his voice matching the look on his face.

Harry, too, watched. "What does the legend say?" he asked, as the decanter glowed before it blindingly pulsed to a blue incandescence. The pulse had caused both Steelgrip and Harry to cover their eyes, but their vision was still dazed by the flare of light.

Both Steelgrip and Harry gasped; Steelgrip in awe and Harry in surprise. There, in the decanter, balanced on its tip, was the runed dagger Harry had used to slice through his throat at Stonehenge.

"How in the name of Flamel did that get here?!" Harry asked in surprise and shock.

Steelgrip looked from the dagger to his most recent customer. "You recognise this object?" Steelgrip asked, controlling the tone of his voice.

Harry looked at Steelgrip in a panic and then uttered only half a lie, "I saw it being used in a ritual performed by a Ministry employee – an Unspeakable," Harry explained, hoping his slip hadn't been too blatant.

Steelgrip went from surprise to concern. "If you saw the Ministry Unspeakable again, would you recognize him?" Steelgrip asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

Harry smirked, but then noticed the subtle change in Steelgrip's expression. "He died during the ritual," Harry explained. "Why do you ask, Senior Account Manager?" Harry asked formally, worried about what this might mean.

Steelgrip looked thoughtful for a moment before replying, "There is a, as you can imagine, little-used protocol for this type of situation. I will need to consult with my superiors. I would ask you take a seat over here," Steelgrip said, walking towards the door and gesturing for Harry to sit in the chair by the door, well away from the table, "while I consult with them."

Harry stood, walked over to the indicated chair and sat, "As you wish. Please do not be gone long. I have additional business in the Alleys today," Harry explained.

"I shall be as efficient as possible," Steelgrip said, and opened the door. He said a few words to the guards outside. Two of them entered and he then left the room, closing the door behind him.

While Steelgrip was gone, Harry began thinking about the dagger. "I only used it because it had tested as being an extremely powerful magical focal lens. How did it get here? Now? Did someone send it back?" he thought. He reviewed the ritual in his mind and there should have been no way for the dagger to return unless he had made some kind of error in his calculations.

He was interrupted from his musings by the opening of the door. A basajaun entered the office. He (or so Harry presumed it was male, as the basajaunak had never allowed their females to be seen by outsiders) was dressed in a deeply-hooded, loose-fitting blue robe with runes embroidered covering nearly every exposed area of the robes.

Upon the entry of the robed basajaun, the guards immediately stood more erect, and bowed their heads.

Harry recognized these as runes of protection and defense, indicating the basajaun was a Basajaunak holy one. The holy one was carrying a smoking thurible in one gnarled hand, while the other hand held a long staff with a large white glowing crystal at the top. Harry could smell the scents of sage and jasmine wafting out of the thurible to fill the room.

Now that he had fully entered the room and began circling the table, chanting in a low-frequency tongue, Steelgrip and another basajaun entered the room. Both guards braced and saluted more quietly than Harry had expected. Steelgrip waved the guards out and closed the door behind him.

It was clear to Harry that Steelgrip was the managerial inferior to the basajaun he had escorted into the room. This one was much older and wearing a brightly-polished suit of gold plate armour, sans great helm. Both kept respectfully silent as the holy one continued walking around the table, chanting.

Harry knew, from his past experience, that standing or speaking would be considered an affront so he remained calm and quiet as the holy one continued another walk around the table. The holy one

stopped and turned to look through the decanter at the dagger. Harry was startled out of his calm as the staff loudly struck the stone floor. Once. Twice. On the third time, the chanting stopped.

Harry looked at the holy one, and in the shadow of the hood, two glowing yellow orbs within the hood caught him in their gaze. He felt a pressure upon his mind, reminding him of Snape's and Dumbledore's attempts at Legilimency. The only difference is that he was unable to hold back this pressure. He felt a wave move past his Occlumency shields, bypassing them as if they weren't even there. He tried to tear his eyes away, but the yellow orbs held him.

Held him as he thought of dying at Stonehenge.

Held him as he kissed Luna.

Held him as he heard of Hermione's death.

Held him as he destroyed Tom Riddle for the last time.

Held him through all the pain, love, fear and deception of Hogwarts.

Held him as Hermione was struck at the Department of Mysteries.

Held him as he killed the basilisk.

Held him as he rescued Hermione from the troll.

Held him as he killed Quirrell.

Held him through the years of abuse, neglect and hatred from the Dursleys.

Held him as he saw a memory he had not been aware he had – his mother and father looking down at him with smiles on their faces and tears in their eyes shortly after his birth.

Harry stopped trying to get away from the gaze, but he realised, as the image of his parents' emotional faces faded from his mind's eye, the holy one had pulled back his hood and had walked to stand directly in front of him.

The holy one was speaking to him, but in a dialect he did not understand. The older basajaun translated for him. "Our Most Revered says that you have great responsibility but have made grave mistakes in the past," he said, listening carefully to the holy man, who began speaking again.

"You are here to right a great wrong...a great catastrophe. You must not be the cause of another one," the older basajaun said.

The holy one spoke further. The older basajaun bowed his head to the holy one and spoke in the same dialect. The holy one nodded



and repeated himself. "You destroyed the world you knew to come here to right this wrong. You took from that world the opportunity to be whole once more, but the soul which departed would never return."

"What?! Destroyed the world?!" Harry asked in shock, standing in the process.

The holy one nodded and continued speaking, translated as he spoke by the older one, "Yes, destroyed. You used this object, The Blade of The Great Elders, to focus the power of the ley lines. Once the ley lines were drained, they began destroying the very soil, rock, air, water and fire to replenish themselves. It took all of the magic that was your world to bring you here where you stand."

Harry sat down heavily at this news, but the holy one continued. "You have paid a dear price, this we know. But you must never try to save one who is already gone beyond the Veil of Futures. The cost is too terrible." The holy man stopped for a moment, sensing Harry's distress.

Harry was lost in his anguish. "I didn't mean to...James and Teddy dead...Luna, oh! My Luna! What have I done?" He was about to spiral down into a well of self-pity when he looked up at the older basajaun's translation of a sharp rebuke.

"You! You do not have the right to wallow in your woes!" the older basajaun translated the holy one, whose gnarled finger was accusingly pointed at Harry. "You must look to the pale-eyed one for your explanation. You have a duty to those who are no more and to those who must be saved. You are a warrior in a boy's body. You must let go of these limitations of youth and take on the mantle of a warrior now." The holy one approached Harry. The older one explained. "Do not touch him. Do not speak to him. Do not DARE harm him. If he chooses to touch you, do not pull away, no matter what."

Harry did as he was told, knowing there were worse things than death available as a punishment from the Basajaunak. Looking at the older basajaun, it was clear that in a fight – magical, muggle, dirty or fair – the older basajaun would kill him more easily than the effort it took to smile.

Harry watched in trepidation as the holy one approached him. He schooled his features to appear calm. The holy one stood before him, and slowly reached out to Harry's forehead and placed his index finger on the still-fading remains of the scar on his forehead as he began chanting again.

Suddenly Harry's world was filled with pain and screams. His vision was filled with the titanic battle his magic and the Horcrux had fought, and he watched as the Horcrux was utterly annihilated and the wizarding space in his skull removed.

Harry slumped forward but the holy one held him in the chair and spoke. Once again the older basajaun translated. "I had, at first thought it was evil coming from you. And it was. But it was not you. I see you destroyed it only last night. Do you know who left this evil in you? How long this evil had been there?"

Harry nodded but was still too stunned by the cessation of pain to speak.

The holy one eased Harry back into the chair and barked sharply over his shoulder. The older basajaun looked at Steelgrip and nodded to him. Steelgrip opened the door, shouted something to someone outside the door and closed the door. Less than a minute later, there was a knock on the door. Steelgrip opened the door, received a vial and handed it to the older goblin, who in turn walked it over to the holy one, bowed his head in reverence and handed the holy one the vial.

Harry was exhausted. The spasms from the pain he experienced caused his body to tremble at the aftermath of the adrenalin-induced fatigue. He heard the holy one chant again and looked up, surprised to see the holy one applying gentle pressure to hold him in the chair. He then moved a small potions vial to Harry's lips and said something.

"He says drink it. It will help you to get strength again to get better," the older basajaun said.

Harry nodded then allowed the holy one to pour it into his mouth and he swallowed it. The holy one began speaking again.

"You will finish today's business here, go to those who will love and support you and to the ones you love and support," the holy one gestured to the stack of parchment now covered with writing in the golden blood ink. "You have more tasks with us later, but you must return for those," the holy one then gestured to the dagger in the decanter, "but you must decide how you want to keep this safe. You would do well to trust," the holy one pointed at the older one then back at Harry again, "this one with your affairs, much as you trusted me to discuss this evil you destroyed," the holy one smiled and then, in a very human gesture, squeezed both of Harry's shoulders and kissed his forehead.

"You have our blessings," the older basajaun said, translating the holy one's final words. The holy one then walked back to the table, picked up the thurible. As he headed for the door, both the older basajaun and Steelgrip bowed their heads. The door opened of its own accord as the holy one left the room and closed on its own once he was gone.

Harry watched as the older basajaun walked over and stood in front of him. The older basajaun looked at Steelgrip expectantly.

Steelgrip released his breath explosively, then walked quickly to the table, picked up the chair he had been sitting in and carried it over so it was facing Harry, then took two steps back and one to the right. The older basajaun smiled and sat down. Harry was about to ask a question, but was stayed by the older one raising his hand.

"Lord Potter, I am certain we all feel humbled by the presence and message from Our Most Revered One. It is even more humbling to receive a blessing from Our Most Revered One. I apologise for not introducing myself earlier, but events prevented it. I am Guilder Ironfist and I am the Vice Chairman of Major Accounts and European Strategic Operations for Gringott's Wizarding Bank," the older basajaun explained.

Harry nodded and swallowed. He was still overwhelmed by the revelations from the holy one and the apparent destruction of the Horcrux. "I don't have to die in the forest this time through," he thought to himself.

"While Steelgrip has been managing the accounts for House Potter for some time now, your expanded portfolio," Ironfist gestured

towards the stack of parchment on the table behind him, "will likely require I either reassign his other clients or assign you a dedicated Senior Account Manager. As was stated previously, you need not make this decision today. The only decision you truly need make today is making The Blade of The Great Elders safe."

Harry used the time Ironfist spoke to collect himself and focus. "As The Most Revered One said, I should trust you. What is your counsel in this matter?" Harry asked.

"I imagine no one but you can touch it for the moment. I would suggest we place it in your Head of House vault for now. No one may enter that vault except you or those physically with you," Ironfist suggested.

"Head of House vault?" Harry asked. He had not heard of this in his previous life.

"Yes. When an heir of an ancient and noble house claims his lordship within two years of his eleventh birthday, he is given access to all of the house's vaults, including the Head of House vault. If the position of Lordship is not claimed in time, the contents of all but the household vault are surrendered to the Ministry. This law is fairly recent and has only been in effect for the past eleven years," Ironfist explained.

Harry practically growled, "Dumbledore! That conniving, blundering imbecile!" He turned to Ironfist. "Sir, I would like an accounting of all House Potter vaults. I want to know the name of everyone who has a key, everyone who has made a withdrawal and, if possible, any material items which have been removed. I then will likely want all of it back," Harry said, seething in anger.

Ironfist turned his head slightly towards Steelgrip, "Tell them to do it quickly. Our client is in need of rest." Ironfist turned around just in time to see Harry stifle a yawn. Steelgrip moved to his desk, pressed a gem and ordered the necessary documentation.

"I presume you would like to be the only one with access to your accounts and vaults?" Ironfist asked.

"I would like there to be two...no. Make that three people other than myself, if possible," Harry said, thinking about breakfast and the hallway before breakfast.

"Are any of these three Lords of other houses?" Ironfist asked.

"No. I don't trust any of the other Lords, as far as I know," Harry replied.

"That is understandable. What are the names of the other three people?" Ironfist asked.

"Luna Selene Lovegood, Hermione Jane Granger and Padma Janhavini Patil," Harry said, ticking them off on his fingers.

"Lord Potter, are any of these women betrothed to you or under the protection of House Potter?" Ironfist asked.

Seeing Harry's hesitation, Ironfist explained, "If not, it is a simple matter to make it so. Would you like us to take care of this for you?"

Harry nodded, a grateful look on his face. "I would especially like to know if there are any betrothal contracts between House Lovegood and House Potter. I would also like to ensure Miss Granger's parents are kept safe."

He reached into his pocket and handed Ironfist the folded parchment. "I've made a list of items I would like Gringott's to handle," he explained.

Ironfist unfolded the parchment and read it, a grim expression on his face. "That may take some time. Perhaps by this time tomorrow, we can go over the results of the audit of your accounts and vaults. We have already invalidated any keys for your accounts. A replacement key for you is on its way to this office now. We will also be providing you with a means to transport from wherever you are to the Concierge waiting area and to return you from whence you came, if that is your desire."

"What about the wards at Hogwarts or the Ministry?" Harry asked.

"Ah yes. I'm pleased to say those will not prevent the use of a port key made by us. As soon as these items are here, I would

recommend you be on your way. You appear to be on the edge of sleep," Ironfist said with concern.

Harry nodded as he yawned deeply, finding his voice once his need to yawn was done, "That seems reasonable."

There was a knocking at the door. Steelgrip stood and walked quickly to the door and pulled it open. A blue velvet pillow was handed to him and he walked over to Ironfist, bowed and offered him the pillow, which Ironfist took, smiling with some amusement at his underling.

Harry noticed a key and a pair of cuff links were laying on the pillow. Ironfist explained, "Here is your new master key and these," he said, indicating the cuff links, "are a portkey and a second portkey. Both serve the same function, but in the event one is lost, you still have the other available to you. Needless to say, by 'lost' I mean torn from your sleeve or the sleeve torn from your shirt, as it is otherwise impossible for them to be taken." Ironfist undid the tie holding the key to the pillow and handed Harry his new key. Ironfist then took Harry's hands and put the cuff links into the holes in his shirt sleeves, which had not been there previously.

"Clever," Harry observed.

"Expedient. They will do this for any shirt you choose to wear them with," Ironfist said.

Harry looked up from the cuff links. "I would like similar items for the three ladies I mentioned," he said.

"We can do that only once the paperwork we discussed has been completed," Ironfist explained. When he saw Harry was about to argue, he held his hand up, "We are bound by the laws of the Ministry in this, Lord Potter. If, however, you would like three additional unkeyed portkeys, Gringotts can provide those to you. You would merely need to place a droplet of blood on each one to key it to you. I do have to caution you that you should not let them fall into another's hands, or they would be able to use them instead of you," Ironfist said with a small smile of satisfaction, as he watched Harry's awareness of the situation reflect on the young wizard's face, "I do so prefer it when the important ones are also intelligent ones," Ironfist thought, as he looked at Harry.

"Thank you, Sir. You and Steelgrip have been most helpful," Harry said, stifling another yawn.

"We should get the Blade secured and then you should go and get some much-needed rest, Lord Potter. Return here tomorrow at this time and we should be prepared to provide you the necessary documentation to protect these three ladies," Ironfist said.

Harry nodded, then sported a wry grin as he looked at Ironfist, "Anything for a price?" he asked, his voice echoing his smile.

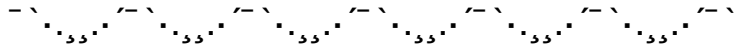
"I will be candid with you," Ironfist began, a frown on his face, "and tell you the claiming of your rightful place in wizarding society profits both you and us. Should the Ministry seize your vaults, they would liquidate them and we would stop collecting interest and fees. With you claiming them, we maintain our liquidity, we collect a small amount of interest and, of course, the account, audit, and vault fees, and the costs of the other services we have provided House Potter over the past millenium." Ironfist's countenance changed to that of a most serious basajaun. "We should visit your vault, place The Blade of The Great Elders there for safety and then see you returned to Hogwarts. Any other business you need done in The Great Square today can be easily handled by Gringotts staff," Ironfist explained, seeing that Harry was fading quickly due to reliving the removal of the Horcrux.

Harry nodded, lifted the dagger from the decanter and followed behind the two basajaunak. He had no recollection of how far they walked. It seemed to take almost no time before they were standing before a small, non-descript vault door simply labelled '1'.

Steelgrip gestured for Harry to stand next to him at the vault door. He then took Harry's wand hand and drew it down the middle of the vault door. As his hand moved downward, he felt, more than heard, the locking mechanisms, which had not been used for over a decade, unlatch one by one.

There was a loud, deep, rumbling BOOM! As the door lowered, allowing entrance to the Head of House Potter vault. Harry gasped in surprise and fear. At the entrance to the vault, beyond where the vault door had stood, was a veil across the entrance which

appeared identical to the veil held in the Department of Mysteries which Sirius had fallen through.



Steelgrip sensed Harry's hesitation. "No need to worry, Lord Potter," Steelgrip explained. "This is another layer of security Gringott's applies to high-wealth customers."

"But it looks exactly like the Veil of Death," Harry said numbly, as the memories of Sirius' death washed over him again.

"Where, precisely, is this Veil of Death, Lord Potter?" Steelgrip asked, a hint of anger in his tone.

Still reliving Sirius' death, Harry explained haltingly, "In the Department of Mysteries. I had a vision... Sirius was being tortured... Mr. Weasley... Hermione got hit and I thought she was dead... Voldemort tried to kill me again..." his voice fading to silence as tears coursed down his cheeks.

Steelgrip knew this was a special customer, and the level of "special" seemed to climb in every interaction.

"Well, Lord Potter, we can discuss this topic again in the future. For now, please step through the entrance of your vault, place the blade within, then come out again. Upon my honour, I swear no harm shall befall you," Steelgrip said in as soft a tone as possible.

Harry nodded, his eyes still focused on the Veil. He walked in, feeling a thrilling chill as he touched the meandering swirls of colour. He could feel something reach out to touch his magic and his mind, slipping through his occlumency shields as if they weren't there.

His eyes were filled with a wash of colour when suddenly he found himself standing in a sitting room. Just ahead of him on the left was an empty, brightly-lit alcove in the wall at chest height. It had two hooks in it, just the right width apart to hold the cross guard of the Blade.

He placed the Blade on the hooks and watched as it was pulled halfway into the wall, seemingly embedded.



A flash caught his eye and he looked down at the simple brass nameplate he had not noticed earlier. It had a script in large symbols he was unable to read. Below this, in parenthesis, it said "The Blade of The Great Elders".

The light over the alcove went out and Harry noticed the only remaining light was shining from the door he had entered through. He turned and walked through the door, finding himself once more in front of Steelgrip.

"The Blade of The Great Elders is safe then?" Steelgrip asked of the exhausted young man in front of him.

Harry nodded mutely, barely able to hold his eyes open.

"Guards, escort Lord Potter to the transit lounge and see that he arrives at his destination," Steelgrip said.

Two large basajaun, and had Harry been paying attention to more than just putting one foot in front of the other would have noticed they appeared to be twins as well, escorted Harry to a lavishly decorated room.

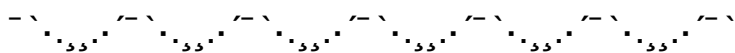
"Your portkey, sir?" the basajaun on the left asked, holding his hand out.

"My left cufflink," Harry said, holding his arm up to show the guard.

The guard removed a crystal from his belt and held it over the cufflink then looked at the crystal.

Ensuring he was not touching Harry, the guard asked Harry to activate his portkey.

"I am not staying at the Dursleys," Harry said and disappeared from the room. The guard watched the crystal. When its glow changed to green, the guards nodded to one another and left the room. Lord Potter's portkey delivered him and he was uninjured. Their task complete, the guards left to complete other work. Neither paid undo attention to the cloaked figure sitting in the corner.

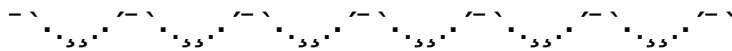


Harry stumbled through the tunnel and found his way to its entrance. Although exhausted, his nearly-instinctual habits took over. He listened at the hidden doorway. Hearing nothing, he opened the entrance far enough to see no one was nearby.

Leaving the tunnel, he haltingly made his way to the infirmary. Seeing that Madam Pomfrey was quietly working in her office, Harry made his way to Hermione's bedside and sat.

"We're another step closer, 'Mione. I am so tired though," he whispered as he leaned over next to the girl's ear.

He crossed his arms on the bed rail and lay his head down, intending only to close his eyes for a minute. When the girls came in an hour later, they found him still asleep, holding onto Hermione's hand.



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I am overwhelmed by the simply amazing number of people who have read and reviewed this story so far. Thanks to all of you and I am so happy you are all enjoying the story so far.

If any of you know how the Image Manager feature works, I would be most grateful for your assistance. I have tried twice now to create and upload an animated GIF for this story to no avail. I do not know if the fault is mine, the format of the image, or some other factor, but I am unable to get my GIF to be viewable on the site.

Gender issue fixed in Infirmary scene thanks to Aealket! Please also take the time to read his most excellent stories at ~aealket

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Chapter 4 – Dreams To Whispering

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Padma and Parvati finished crafting the oath and shared it with Lavender and Luna. Both girls nodded and the four of them formed a circle and recited it in unison, holding their wands so they touched in the middle.

"We freely form a circle of coven. Only all of those of the circle may grow the circle. Knowledge within the circle will be kept within the circle. Knowledge known to others is not bound to this oath. Only truth may be spoken between members of the circle. So say we all. So mote it be." A deep thrum reverberated in the walls for a moment.

Being the most in tune with her magic, Luna could feel the bindings complete and knew the magic had taken hold.

"Padma, why are Luna's and your robes trimmed in ermine and sable and why is the Potter coat of arms over your heart and where did you get such lovely robes from anyway and Luna what do you mean Harry's only now realised what he has done and why the need for such secrecy and why was Harry sitting at breakfast with you and how is it he's grown six inches taller since I saw him yesterday at Quidditch practice? He's almost a head taller than you, Padma!" Lavender managed to get out in a single breath.

"Slow down, Lav. Let them take those questions one at a time," Parvati said, pulling the girl into a one-armed hug to lessen the sting of rebuke. Lavender looked at her friend and nodded.

"We should get comfortable first. This could take some time," Luna said. She walked over to Hermione's bed and, removing her shoes, scooted into the middle of the bed. She beckoned the other three over.

Once all four of them were comfortable, Luna began telling her side of things. "After my housemates had once again taken my things and hurt me, they left me in the corridor to get to breakfast," she said.

Parvati and Lavender gasped while Padma suddenly found her hands in her lap to be interesting to look at, her feelings of guilt clearly evident to Parvati.

"I heard footfalls behind me and was afraid they were going to harm me further when Harry spoke to me. He healed all the injuries they inflicted on me then dressed me. He did not even use his wand. He then told me he wanted to be my friend and that the people who were supposed to love him like family had abused him as well. He claimed lordship over House Potter using the old form of the claim," the other three girls gasped.

Luna continued, "and then he swore to be my true friend and that he would never harm me. He somehow knew my full name. When he finished the oath, this immense pulse of magic washed over me and ever since then, I can tell what he is feeling."

Lavender interrupted. "What do you mean you can tell what he is feeling?"

"I can tell if he is sad or happy or angry. I could feel he was really angry with the people who hurt me," Luna explained.

"But... but that is like one of the fairy tales I read when I was younger. How is that possible?" Lavender asked.

"I don't know," Luna admitted, "and that is one of the things that scares me." She looked at the others then smiled, "But I can tell you I feel completely safe when Harry wraps his arms around me," she gushed.

Parvati noticed Padma's slight smile and nod at Luna's admission. "How did you get mixed up in all of this, Pad, and how did you come to be under the protection of House Potter?" Parvati asked.

Lavender looked sharply at Parvati, "What do you mean?" she asked.

"The coat of arms over the heart of a girl's robes indicates she is either betrothed to the lord or heir of the house or is under the protection of the house," Parvati explained. "And since our father did not betroth us to Harry, it means he has, on his own, brought her under his protection."

"I don't know," Padma began slowly, then explained further, "I was running back to the tower to check on Luna and found them in the corridor. Harry was holding Luna and I was relieved to see Luna was in real clothing again."

"But the moment I got near them, his wand seemed to grow right out of his hand and point at my head. The end of it was pulsing and I closed my eyes because I thought I was going to die," she said, clearly remembering the fear-filled moment as she was trembling. Luna reached over and put her hand on Padma's knee.

Parvati and Lavender were holding tightly to one another while they listened enraptured to Padma's story.

"It was everything I feared the Heir of Slytherin would be like. Cold. Angry. Homicidal. But then Luna told him I was her friend. I was about to run to get away... to keep him from seeing my embarrassment when he grasped my hand and pulled me to him, next to Luna. He apologised for threatening me and then claimed I was a friend of House Potter," she said.

"Then Luna told me what he had done for her and that I had no reason to be frightened of him and that all he wanted was friendship," she continued.

"But the way both of you were holding onto him when you came into the Great Hall..." Parvati said questioningly.

Padma nodded, "It just felt so good to hold onto him. And then, I don't know how he did it, but I told him I was cold and he conjured this cloak for me," she said, indicating the cloak she was now using as a blanket over their laps, "and he did it wandlessly and silently. And it felt just so good to hold onto his hand that neither of us wanted to let go of him," she said, looking down at her hands again, "And I miss holding his hand already," she thought to herself and sighed.

Suddenly she felt Luna cupping her cheek with her hand, "I miss holding his hand too," she said.

Padma just nodded, but Parvati and Lavender looked at one another and then looked at Padma and Luna again.

"And when we arrived in the Great Hall," Luna said, continuing the story, "Randle..."

Parvati cut her off, "That Ravenclaw slag from fourth year? She can be such a bitch!"

Luna tilted her head slightly, "I think she's still a virgin, Parvati, but likely we're talking about the same girl. Anyway, Randle said something insulting to Padma and one of them cast a tripping jinx at me but Harry kept me from falling and then he served us breakfast and seemed to know exactly what I wanted to eat." Luna looked at Padma.

Padma nodded, "He not only knew what I wanted to eat, but seemed to know my dietary preferences. Almost as if he had read my mind," she said, looking at Luna questioningly.

"Perhaps he is just exceptionally observant," Luna replied to the unasked question then continued. "Randle then insulted Hermione, Padma and I in one sentence and Harry reaffirmed his friendship and the care he had for Padma and I," Luna said.

Padma's face lit up in understanding as she exclaimed, "That's when Randle started losing her breakfast! Great Merlin! He did that to her! How did I miss that?" she asked herself.

"I don't know how he did it either, but I, too, am certain it was Harry that did it," Luna said. Her fingers began absently tracing the Potter

coat of arms over Padma's heart, surprising the older Ravenclaw. "And since we're telling the truth to one another, I also know he loves us and will protect us with all that he is and all that he has," she said softly, looking deeply into Padma's eyes.

Padma gently took Luna's hands in her own, "And we know he would do anything to protect Hermione. The love he has for her is frightening in its intensity," Padma said, "and he believes she can hear him even though she is petrified."

"She loves him too, but is too afraid to tell him," Parvati said. Padma and Luna broke their eyes away from one another to look at Parvati.

Lavender thought the two witches were silently questioning the truth of it and explained, "No, it's true. When Harry rescued her from that troll in first year on Halloween, we knew for certain that she was in love. She never spoke of it directly except once, on her birthday this past year, she confided in us that she loved him and asked us not to tell anyone."

"And you didn't share this with anyone?" Padma asked incredulously, knowing the incorrigible gossips these two were.

"Padma, did you know Hermione's parents are both Dentists?" Lavender asked.

Both Padma and Luna shuddered. "Slytherin's Great Green Toenails! She's a snake amongst lions!" Padma exclaimed.

Lavender wanted to know more. "Then what happened after breakfast?" she asked.

Luna looked at Padma, who nodded for her to continue. "We escorted Harry to the Infirmary. If you could have seen the tenderness he treated Hermione with, it would bring tears to your eyes. I was nearly crying when I saw him take her hand and talk to her," Luna said, remembering the sight before her in the hospital wing.

"And then Harry asked Madam Pomfrey to explain the Elixir of Reviving to us, as he surreptitiously spoke with Randle. I couldn't hear a thing he said to her, but she went rushing off afterwards,

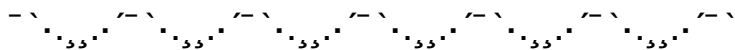
seeming to be completely relieved of all the symptoms Harry inflicted upon her," Padma said.

"And then he sent us up here to get his and Hermione's book bags and asked us to ask you two if you had any Jane Austen books or knew if Hermione had any. I think he intends to read them aloud to her," Luna said.

"And what did you mean by he knows what he did?" Lavender asked, looking piercingly at Luna.

Luna looked down at her lap, "He knows he destroyed his own world to get here. The Harry Potter we knew up until yesterday at the start of Quidditch practice died yesterday. This Harry Potter came from another universe in the future to try to change the time line so that Hermione, the three of us, and likely several others he cares about don't die."

Parvati caught Lavender from falling off the bed as she fainted.



Lavender came to looking into two pair of amber eyes. To her, it seemed Padma and Parvati had just transformed from some great, predatory cats hunting for prey in the night and only their eyes had yet to finish returning to the dull lustre of normal human eyes. Their eyes seemed to glow with some inner intensity.

"Are you all right, Lavender?" asked one of the twins. Lavender could tell this was Padma. Not by the voice or the clothing, but by the lack of the little queues Parvati used when she spoke in concern.

"I'm fine, Padma. Where is Luna?" Lavender asked, still shaking off the fuzziness from her faint and short nap thereafter, but squeezing both of their hands.

"Looking for the Grints. They're small, hirsute creatures that cause young girls to faint for no reason. Probably due to their body odour," Luna said while lifting up various pillows and looking under the beds, searching for something.

Lavender sat up slowly with the help of Padma and Parvati. Luna stopped her search and walked over to the bed.



"Are you awake again and ready to go to the Infirmary?" Luna asked.

"Luna, I just fainted. I don't need to see Madam Pomfrey because of that!" Lavender exclaimed softly.

"I know that, Silly. It's so we can go visit with Harry and Hermione. Oh! And Penelope and Daphne and Colin and Justin and Mrs. Norris and Sir Nicholas. While no one else may believe him, I think Harry is on to something with the idea that, although they are petrified, they can hear and see and feel," Luna said.

"Do you breathe through your ears, Luna?" Parvati asked in amazement at the young Ravenclaw.

"I don't think so. Perhaps, if you want to test it later, you could gently blow in my ear to see if I can taste your breath that way," Luna answered.

Parvati and Padma looked at one another and Padma shook her head ever so slightly.

"Perhaps later would be better, Luna. After all, we should go see how everyone in the Infirmary is doing," Parvati said.

Luna walked over to the bookcase next to Hermione's bed and found a well-worn trade edition of "Pride and Prejudice" with a bookmark perhaps a hundred pages into the book. "I recall seeing Hermione reading this and, if she is anything like me with books, wouldn't want to hear another story until she finished reading the one she was working on," she explained.

After picking up their book bags and speaking with Neville to retrieve Harry's bag, they headed to the Infirmary. Upon entering, they all stopped and stared, tears in their eyes.

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Harry was fast asleep, his head resting on one arm over the bed rail, his other hand holding on to one of Hermione's hands.

Madam Pomfrey heard their entry and walked out of her office to see the four girls had tears in their eyes. She had been expecting

Professor McGonagall, so it was with some surprise the two Ravenclaw girls were back and had brought two Gryffindor girls with them.

As she was about to address them, Professor McGonagall came up behind them. She noted the four girls, quickly ran their associations and relationships through her head and noted they were all looking in the direction of Hermione's bed. Poppy had told her she would need to steel her heart when she saw the sight at Hermione's bed, but she was prepared for the worst.

Unfortunately, the devotion Harry seemed to have for Hermione was not what she had prepared herself to see. She held her hand to her mouth in an effort to stifle the gasp at seeing Harry holding Hermione's hand.

The girls looked up behind to see Professor McGonagall let a tear slip out of her eyes and wander down her cheek. She had not been entirely successful in stifling the "Oh my!" she had gasped out.

Lavender pulled Parvati into a sideways hug, pulling Parvati's head down against her own, "Isn't it just beautiful, Parv?" Lavender asked, dabbing at her eyes with her ever-present handkerchief.

"He would do anything for her," Parvati said softly.

Minerva had, after what to her felt like an eternity, finally collected herself. "Did you girls come to visit with Mr. Potter or did you come here for some other purpose?" she asked in a low voice, raising an eyebrow at Lavender and Parvati.

Padma unblinkingly looked Professor McGonagall in the eye, "We came here at Mr. Potter's specific request, Professor McGonagall. We have brought our things to study with Harry and to keep him and our friends company during their convalescence," she explained respectfully.

"You do realise that people who are petrified cannot hear you," Minerva said kindly.

"I have not specifically researched that as yet, Professor," Padma said, "but it will be a topic for us to research when we are not here studying and doing homework."

Poppy chose this moment to remind all present the Infirmary was her domain. "And you are all always welcome to do so as long as you are not disruptive to those who are convalescing," Poppy said kindly, but with a tone of iron.

"We would never intentionally be disruptive, Madam Pomfrey," Lavender said, "we just want to make certain our friends know we care enough about them to come and speak with them. Even if they can't hear us, we will know we did all we could to keep them as comfortable as possible."

"Well, Miss Brown, Miss Patil, Miss Patil and Miss Lovegood. For demonstrating such a strong friendship for those both inside of and outside of your own houses, twenty-five points for each of you. You are to be commended for your devotion to your friends," Minerva said.

She then turned to Poppy, "I wanted to talk to you about another matter, Madam Pomfrey. Can we retire to your office?"

"Actually, Professor McGonagall, would you first transfigure young Mr. Potter's chair into a bed and his clothing into something more suitable for sleep? Ladies, if you would look away for a moment to provide Mr. Potter a moment of privacy?" Poppy asked.

Minerva nodded and with a wave of her wand and a soft incantation, Harry was now laying down in a bed right next to Hermione's and dressed in Gryffindor-coloured pyjamas. House elves quickly appeared and covered Harry with a sheet and blanket, disappeared and then reappeared, depositing four chairs around Harry's bed. The little beings then disappeared with nary a pop.

"Thank you, Professor. Now we can talk in my office. Ladies, please be respectful and do not awaken Mr. Potter. He is in need of his sleep," Poppy gently chided the girls before leading Minerva into her office and closing the door.

Luna looked at Padma with a smile and ruefully shook her head at the two adults. Padma walked to Harry's bed and set her book bag on the floor. She pulled up one of the chairs so she could sit next to Harry's head. She leaned over and gently brushed the hair from his

brow, noting his scar was much fainter than she remembered seeing it previously.

"Sleep sweet, Harry," she whispered then sat in her chair and pulled her potions text, a blank piece of parchment and an Ever-inking quill from her book bag.

Luna sat in the chair next to Padma, although she did not prepare to study. Instead, she began reading Hermione's copy of "Pride and Prejudice".

Lavender and Parvati sat down simultaneously, carefully watching the other two. It could not help but be noticed that both Luna and Padma periodically looked up at Harry. Based on their expressions, it almost seemed they were afraid he was going to disappear, or so Lavender thought.

The four of them looked up and, in chorus, bade Professor McGonagall a good day as she left the Infirmary, before returning to their individual tasks at hand.

Parvati, however, knew her twin better than any other person knew her. Padma was crushing seriously over a boy she had only ever spoken to for the first time this morning before breakfast. She wondered if Padma really was working on potions or if she was idly doodling. It was difficult to tell by looking at the often cryptic script Padma chose to write in.

While both of them knew how to write in Hindi, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Gujarati, and Tamil, the two of them had developed a hybridisation of the scripts they referred to between themselves as "Diary Script".

And whatever Padma was writing was in "Diary Script".

"Seedha?" Parvati asked. This was her twin name for Padma, which in English would be translated to "right" but in Hindi referred to the holding up or straightening of things as, when they were younger, Padma would often help Parvati to stand again when she had fallen.

"Yes, Baaya?" Padma responded with her twin name for Parvati. In English this would be translated to "left" but in Hindi referred to something sinister, as Parvati had always been a more troublesome

girl when she was younger and was frequently getting the two of them into mischief.

"Diary time?" Parvati asked, implying she knew Padma was not working on her potions and that, whatever it was she was writing, she did not want it being read by anyone but the two of them.

Padma stopped writing and looked up at Parvati, a hint of a blush on her cheeks. She nodded and explained. "Something for later," she said, her gaze taking in Luna and Lavender.

Parvati nodded and reached down to get the latest copy of Witches Weekly from her book bag.

Padma looked down at her parchment and began writing again, periodically glancing at her potions book.

While this exchange was not entirely lost on Lavender, she had no context with which to gather anything meaningful from the twins talking. In the past when Padma and Parvati had discussions in her presence, it always seemed as if they were having two conversations at once: one for her to hear and another in which they spoke to one another.

While it seemed to Luna that Parvati and Lavender would be satisfied with merely sitting and going through a silly weekly trash rag, which is how Luna thought of any periodical or daily which competed with her father's newspaper, she could not sit idly by and let Harry do all of the work, or so it seemed.

After skimming the first one hundred and fourteen pages of Hermione's book, she at least had some idea of where the story started, where it was at when Hermione had placed the bookmark, and where it would be headed by the end.

She abhorred reading ahead of others in a book, she had already deciphered the notes Padma had been writing and, while she did not doubt her father would agree to a betrothal contract, she did not know enough about the Senior Patil to know if he would be willing to sign a betrothal contract for both Padma and Parvati.

She knew Hermione's parents were both muggles, so the probability of her father signing a betrothal contract approached zero unless he were to be influenced by a well-timed imperious curse.

How Lavender fit into all of this, she could not fathom. Neither, apparently, did Padma understand the reason Parvati had included her.

"Wool-gathering isn't going to do any of us any good!" Luna thought to herself and, carefully ensuring the bookmark had not moved, closed the book, stood and set the book on her chair.

"Luna?" Lavender asked, somewhat startled at the girl's movement after so long a period of quiet.

"You weren't there, Lavender, but Harry thinks people who are petrified can hear and feel what is going on around them. We have done nothing, really, but sit here for an hour. I am going to have some quiet introductions and conversations with people I hope to call friends when they are awakened again," Luna declared and excused herself past Lavender and Parvati, walked over to the gap between Penelope's and Daphne's beds and sat down in the chair.

Although they could not understand what she was saying as she was talking barely above a whisper, it was clear to all three of them that Luna was, in fact, introducing herself to the girls and talking to them about what had been happening at the school over the past twenty-four hours. Luna was actually telling the two girls about her course in Ancient Runes and interactions with magical substances.

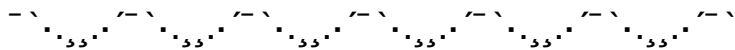
Lavender and Parvati looked at Padma, who shrugged, put her things back into her book bag, excused herself, walked to the space between Colin's and Justin's bed, sat down in the chair and began talking quietly to the two boys. She began talking softly to them about Arithmancy and potion brewing techniques, subjects in which she knew Justin and Colin both had shown a growing interest.

Lavender and Parvati looked at one another and decided the two of them needed to give the Gryffindor resident bookworm something to think about other than schoolwork and extra credit assignments.

They walked around to Hermione's bed and began to quietly read the articles in *Witches Weekly* to her, interjecting their own thoughts

and ideas into the content, surmising the types of questions they thought Hermione would ask and attempting to answer them to the best of their abilities.

Padma and Luna both watched Parvati and Lavender and cringed. If they were in the same state and they were aware and could hear, it would be their own personal torture to have to listen to a discussion about fashion and hair styles. Then again, neither of them knew Hermione well enough to know that she did not share her room mates' love of gossip and make-up tips.



Harry awoke to the soft susurrus of conversation. He kept his eyes closed and listened to the nearly silent orchestra of girls whispering. The loudest of these voices, likely due to their proximity, seemed to be discussing the latest tinting options for skin at a store in Diagon Alley. He did not immediately recognize the voice.

He felt a cold, stiff object in his hand, slowly opened his eyes and looked down, prepared to pull away. He saw he was holding Hermione's hand. He closed his eyes again, and revelled in the knowledge that Hermione was still alive. He decided he would lay there, just listening to these girls' voices.

First one, and then another of the girls' voices stopped and he heard soft foot falls approaching. The closest girl stopped speaking and he felt a weight descend upon the mattress.

"Harry? Are you awake now?" Luna asked, gently placing her hand on his shoulder.

Without opening his eyes, he replied. "I am. I was just relishing the warmth and the sound of your voices speaking together, like a choir," he said. He opened his eyes and rolled over, smiling up at Luna.

"We thought it appropriate to make certain our new friends did not wither in their convalescence for lack of conversation," Padma said, as she approached the bed closer and took Harry's free hand in her own. She had been wanting to do this for the last hour but had been restraining herself, now indulging in the activity when an excuse presented itself.

He squeezed Hermione's hand and released it before he reached up with his free hand and gently ran his fingers down her cheek as he squeezed her hand. "That was incredibly thoughtful, caring, and brave of you, Padma," he said, rolling onto his back to look at both of the girls.

He made eye contact and smiled to Luna as well before turning the other direction to see who had been speaking to Hermione.

He tried to suppress the urge to grimace at Hermione's plight. The two least-studious girls he could remember from his time at Hogwarts were the ones who had been talking about skin tinting options. He immediately recognised Parvati, and after only a few moments, recognised Lavender Brown.

"Hello Parvati. Hello Lavender. This is an unexpected surprise," Harry said as he transferred Padma's hand to his free hand and reached up to take Luna's hand.

Both girls blushed at his attention but were saved by Padma.

"When we went to the..." she stuttered as Harry looked at her with a smile, his eyes seemingly glowing with what she hoped was affection, "um... your house to get your things..." she was somewhat losing her train of thought as he continued to look at her. He squeezed her hand gently, bringing him all the more into her thoughts.

Luna took over the conversation seamlessly, "Parvati and Lavender were instrumental in ameliorating the situation with the Lions," she inserted smoothly.

As Harry's attention shifted to her, Luna was well aware of the reason Padma was having difficulties. It seemed as if all thought left her as she fell into those two deep, green wells.

"Harry! It's so good to see you're feeling better. Parvati and I were so worried when you hit the pitch yesterday. We're so glad you weren't hurt. When Padma and Luna explained about talking to the people who had been petrified, we were more than happy to reach out and help. Are you tired because you're still recovering from your injuries?" Lavender asked.

As she had begun speaking, Harry carefully watched her and noticed she did, in fact, speak entire trains of thought in a single breath.

"Thank you, Lavender. I am definitely feeling better than yesterday," Harry replied, stretching his neck a bit, making it crack. "I do believe I am still tired because of my recuperation but hope that I will be back to normal for classes tomorrow," he continued.

He sat up in bed, not realising the girls were blushing and attempting to avert their eyes from the pyjama-clad boy. Their embarrassment was lessened when he stood and put slippers and a dressing robe on.

Madam Pomfrey's appearance stopped further conversation. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. Your injuries seem to have caught up with you," she said chidingly. Her gaze softened, "Any headaches, aches or pains?" she asked.

"No, Madam Pomfrey, I think the events of yesterday just caught up to me unexpectedly," Harry answered, smiling at the concern the mediwitch was showing him.

Poppy nodded and looked at the four girls, "Did the four of you miss lunch as well?" she asked knowingly, judging by the book bags and their proximity to Harry and Hermione.

Luna managed to answer first. "We lost track of time, Madam Pomfrey, and we didn't want Harry waking up alone. Oh! I didn't mean you, Hermione..." she stammered, realising the petrified students were present.

Padma saved the girl from further embarrassment, "She meant to say without someone to converse."

"Well we cannot have you going without meals," Poppy said kindly, then focused on Harry, "especially you, Mr. Potter," to which Harry nodded.

Poppy called a house elf and asked her to provide a hot lunch to the students. When the house elf had finished bringing in a table and

serving the food, everyone was surprised when Harry gently took hold of its shoulder and spoke to the elf.

"Thank you for bringing us this fine meal. You do Hogwarts proud," he said earnestly to the little creature.

The house elf, Tippy, had never been genuinely thanked before. "You thank Tippy? Witches and wizards not ever thank Tippy before," the little elf said in awe, before popping away with a look of wonder on her face.

Harry had a shocked expression as he stared at the empty space formerly occupied by the elf.

The four girls just stared at Harry.

Lavender and Parvati were afraid he was going to start crying, unsure how to comfort this incredibly nice boy.

Padma was afraid he was going to shout at the unfairness of the treatment of house elves.

Only Luna knew how Harry felt. Luna wasn't afraid of what Harry's reaction was going to be.

Luna was terrified.

She could feel the waves of rage emanating from Harry like raw, hot winds off a desert. She looked at him, her hands trembling, trying to think of something...anything...that would calm him.

Fighting against her own terror, Luna knelt down in front of Harry, where Tippy had popped away from. "Harry?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Harry's eyes focused on her and she felt the anger and hatred evaporate as if it was only a memory of a dream. He put his hand on her cheek, feeling her fear of him for the first time. "I am so sorry, My Little Luna. I am so, so, sorry," he said, his eyes tearing up at having frightened her so. "Please forgive me?" he asked pleadingly.

Luna filled his waiting arms, crying into his shoulder. Feeling the waves of anger suddenly become waves of despair when he saw

the fear he had caused her to feel pushed Luna over an emotional cliff. She had no frame of reference for the power she had over him, but it scared her.

The other three girls and Madam Pomfrey were not merely surprised. They were utterly shocked. They had no idea what had just happened between Harry and Luna, and although Padma had a bit more of an understanding, they really could not fathom the intense emotional turmoil that had taken place.

Madam Pomfrey was about to lean down behind Luna to try to comfort Luna, when she watched as something extraordinary happened.

Harry pulled Luna onto his lap, cradled her against him and started cooing softly to her. "Luna. Shush now. I'm really, really sorry I frightened you. Please forgive me?" he slowly whispered softly in her ear.

It was Lavender, who began rubbing light circles on her back that seemed to calm her most. "Luna, it will all be put right. Besides," she lightly teased, "that looks really comfortable and you're hogging his lap!" she exclaimed with a giggle.

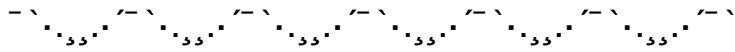
"It is really comfortable," Luna said, giggling while wiping her eyes, trying to cuddle into Harry even more.

Luna felt Harry's arms tighten around her, "Yes, most definitely comfortable," Harry said with a giggle of his own.

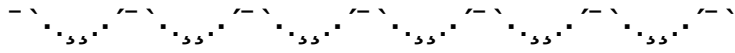
In a world filled with talk of war and a ward filled with petrified children, it did Poppy a world of good to hear these five friends laugh together, without malice or spite.

After a delicious lunch, and a drama-free discussion concerning classes, they were interrupted from choosing another topic by a Gringott's owl entering through the owl window of the Infirmary.

At The End Of All Things – A Harry Potter Omniverse Fan Fiction



Chapter 5 – Time Enough For Love



Harry had just finished reading the letter from the Goblins and the enclosed documents when Professor McGonagall entered the infirmary and informed them she would be immediately escorting them back to their dormitories. She explained that Hagrid had been taken into custody on suspicions of re-opening the Chamber of Secrets and that Headmaster Dumbledore had been suspended.

She had just finished transfiguring Harry's clothes back to normal when Harry firmly squashed her plans.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Deputy Headmistress. I will be remaining here with Hermione and, of course, Madam Pomfrey," he told Minerva calmly.

"Mr. Potter, you will do as you are told or...", McGonagall's words died in her mouth as Harry interrupted her.

"Deputy Headmistress, I respect you and your position. What you ask, however, I cannot do as it would have me violate an oath I made upon my magic. If I were to leave Miss Granger here, or any of the other students here, where no one else was here to protect them, I would lose my magic. I am certain neither of us would want that to happen," Harry said calmly, hoping his bluff would work.

She looked down her nose at him before asking, "And what would it take for your oath to be held true and your person safely within the Gryffindor common room?"

Harry smiled inwardly. This was the Minerva McGonagall he knew. "I feel my oath would still be fulfilled if someone who was physically powerful enough to protect them was present. I would, of course, have to trust this person implicitly," he stated.

"I see. As the Minister of Magic is still speaking with two members of the Board of Governors, I shall make him aware of this situation. I

presume that Hagrid would meet your qualifications?" she asked, the corners of her mouth turning up.

"He would be my only choice at the moment, Deputy Headmistress," Harry replied.

"I will see what I can do. Come ladies. I shall take you to your dormitories," Minerva said, only to be interrupted once more.

"Deputy Headmistress, while I know your intentions are good, none of these girls will be leaving my presence either," Harry said, remaining remarkably calm. The girls all looked at him with some concern.

"See here, Mr. Potter..." McGonagall began, but stopped when she saw Harry was handing her a piece of parchment. She took it from him and read it. As she got halfway through the title of the document, all colour drained from her face.

"You claimed your head of house?" McGonagall whispered in shock.

"I did," Harry replied, then handed her two additional pieces of parchment. "These are letters of temporary writs of magical guardianship for Miss Luna Selene Lovegood signed by Lord Xenophilius Lovegood, another for Miss Padma Anuradha and Miss Parvati Jeevankala Patil signed by Lord Ramrao Patil. Miss Lavender Brown is Lord Paulus Brown's great granddaughter. As the Brown family is a vassal family of House Potter, I shall take it upon myself to assign myself temporary guardianship of her until such time that I may speak face-to-face with her head of house."

McGonagall's face took on a pinched quality as she reviewed each of the documents, verifying they were, in fact, genuine.

As she read them, Harry spoke up again. "Those are copies of the originals, Deputy Headmistress, for Hogwarts records. Copies have also been filed with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and Gringott's," Harry explained.

McGonagall nodded, a lost expression on her face.

"I believe you were going to see if the Minister of Magic would change his mind concerning Hagrid's incarceration, Deputy Headmistress," Harry reminded her gently.

Slightly upset, she turned and left the Infirmary, a mission in mind, regardless of how much she liked Harry, she was still quite put out with him at the moment.

After McGonagall left, Padma noticed Luna was simply staring at Parvati and Lavender. Not so much at the girls, but at what was now adorning their blouses and robes; the Potter coat of arms now decorated all four of the girls' clothes.

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Cornelius Fudge, Lucius Malfoy and Paulus Brown were walking through the Great Hall when Minerva spotted them. While Malfoy had a self-satisfied smirk on his face, Fudge was clearly worried, while Brown was just as clearly on the edge of anger.

Her hurrying across the room did not go unnoticed by the students being held in the Great Hall awaiting escort to their respective dormitories.

The two lords paused as they, too, noticed she was headed in their direction. A firm grip by Brown on the Minister's arm stopped him as well.

"Deputy Headmistress, to what do we owe the honour?" Malfoy asked, his disdain evident in his voice.

"I need to speak with the Minister concerning the safety of one of our students and I have a matter to discuss with Lord Brown," Minerva said, looking at Malfoy as if he were something she had stepped in and was in need of a stick to scrape it off the bottom of her shoe.

"Well, if it is a matter of student safety, perhaps both Lord Brown and I should be present to hear it as well, considering we are both on the Board of Governors," Malfoy said snidely.

"Very well, Lord Malfoy. Shall we go to my office to discuss the matter?" Minerva asked, gesturing the way, holding Malfoy's eyes.

Malfoy whipped his cloak and headed in the direction she indicated.

Minerva looked around the Great Hall and noticed the senior faculty were moving the students to their dormitories. She walked quickly to get ahead of the three men and led them to her office.

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"And that is the situation, Gentlemen," Minerva said, having explained the situation concerning Harry's oath.

"This is preposterous," Malfoy said, with a chuckle, "The Ministry is not going to simply release a man responsible for the monster's release which already killed one student and petrifying five others. We would be lynched!" he exclaimed dismissively.

"Minerva, you will simply have to order the boy to his proper place. You are Deputy Headmistress and responsible for discipline here now," Cornelius explained with a hint of iron.

"How would the wizarding public react if they discovered a member of the Hogwarts' Board of Governors and the Minister of Magic were responsible for the Boy-Who-Lived losing his magic by forcing him to renegue on a magical oath?" Lord Brown asked, his smile indicating the level of loathing the man had for the other two "gentlemen" present.

Cornelius began to bluster in a panic when Lord Brown continued.

"And considering it would be coming on the tails of the petrification of students and due to the Ministry arresting one of the only people the boy trusts implicitly, I have to question the political, likely literal, longevity of both of you. I am hoping the wizarding public would be satisfied with stopping at the lynching of the two of you, as opposed to hanging every member of the Board of Governors, or even the entirety of the Wizengamot, before burning the Ministry building to the ground," Brown concluded speculatively with a chuckle.

"How, precisely, would the wizarding public find this out?" Malfoy asked, a hint of danger in his voice.

"Well, Malfoy, for one, I would tell them in an emergency session of the Wizengamot. For another, do you actually believe you could prevent the story from getting out?" Brown asked incredulously. "Look around you, Man. Do you see that half the portraits in this office are now empty?"

Lucius looked around the room at the portraits, noticing that, even now, almost all of the portraits were now empty.

"It saddens me to think you were the eventual product of Gaius and Chloe, two of the finest people I had the privilege to know," Brown said, naming Lucius' paternal grandparents.

Lucius placed both hands on his cane before Brown, once more, brought him up short.

"If I were you, Lucius, I would consider the consequences of doing anything hasty with company present," the elder Lord hissed dangerously, "I would hate to make an example of you for your contemporaries in such an," he paused thoughtfully, "ungentlemanly fashion."

The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. Both Fudge and McGonagall had stepped back from the two men, Fudge out of fear and McGonagall out of self-preservation, though her wand was already in her hand. Her words, however brought a sobering realisation to both men.

"Gentlemen!" she exclaimed in a chiding tone, "Bickering amongst yourselves is not going to resolve the issue at hand. I need all of your assurances that Mr. Hagrid will be brought back to the castle before nightfall. I will not see Mister Potter lose his magic because you are merely trying to be seen doing something, even though that something is without merit," the elder witch said dangerously.

"I will see Hagrid is brought back to the castle as quickly as possible. If I can use your floo, Minerva, that will help to hasten the process," Fudge said.

"But of course, Minister," McGonagall said, directing him to the fireplace.

As Fudge was throwing the floo powder in the fireplace and calling the DMLE, Brown asked, "And what of Dumbledore returning?"

Lucius had an oily smile on his face as he replied, "He was suspended by ten out of twelve of the Governors. The Minister and the Ministry cannot interfere in that decision, even though yours was one of the dissenting votes. But surely you know this already."

"Very well, then. I shall be awaiting news that Mr. Hagrid has been returned to Hogwarts. I will see both of you gentlemen Monday at the Wizengamot," Brown said dismissively.

Lucius eyed the elder lord venomously as he departed the room.

"I will see that you are informed as soon as Hagrid has been returned, Paulus," Fudge said subserviently.

"Thank you, Cornelius. I'd appreciate that," Brown said, looking at the Minister and then looking out into the corridor where Lucius was waiting on the Minister. Brown whispered softly, "and should you need a less tainted advisor who has the means to ensure you remain safely in the public's high regard, please let me know."

The Minister looked at the man somewhat in shock, but then smiled when he processed what he had been told. "Thank you, Paulus. Perhaps we could talk first-thing Monday?"

"I would like that, Cornelius," Paulus said with genuine warmth. He saw the beginnings of a scowl grace Fudge's face as the Minister looked at Malfoy before walking out ahead of him.

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Lord Brown slowly closed the door, the smile transforming to a scowl once it was fully closed. He immediately cast silencing charms on the walls, ceiling and floor and added a silencing charm between the portrait frames and the room, preventing any of the painting from listening in on the conversation. He then cast a locking spell on the door and cast a collapsing ward to let him know if someone was attempting to physically eavesdrop.

He then turned and allowed his gaze to soften. "Very well, then. Deputy Headmistress, you said you had a personal matter to discuss with me?" Brown asked.

"Yes, Lord Brown. It concerns your great granddaughter, Lavender," Minerva said.

"Has she been harmed?" Paulus asked with some concern.

"No, Lord Brown, she has not been hurt, but I am concerned about her safety," Minerva said.

"Minerva. Please. When we are alone, please call me Paulus. 'Lord Brown' is reserved for official functions and events where it is appropriate. I've known you since you were a student here."

"Very well, Paulus," Minerva said with a smile, "but to better explain the situation, I think it may be best to go speak with your granddaughter and Mr. Potter."

Paulus looked confused. "For what reason... aren't those two a bit young to be dating? I know there is a betrothal contract for the two of them, but..." Paulus began, but stopped when Minerva held up her hand.

"I think it would be best to speak with them directly," Minerva explained.

"Very well. Send for them and I will set them straight," Paulus said.

"It isn't that simple, as we discussed earlier concerning Mr. Potter," Minerva explained.

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All eyes turned to the entry of the Deputy Headmistress and an older man, who was clearly related to Lavender, based on the way she greeted him.

Lavender stood, walked over to the two and curtsied to her great grandfather, "My Lord," she said formally, keeping her eyes down.

Paulus looked down at his favourite great granddaughter and smiled. "My Littlest Flower? Since when are you so formal with your grand-papa?" he asked. The presence of the Potter coat of arms on her robes was not missed by the elder Lord.

She looked up at him and he opened his arms. The smile on her face illuminated the room as she closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I've missed you since Yule!" she exclaimed.

He patted her back. "I can see that. And I have missed you as well," he said. She looked up at him with her wide, happy smile.

He looked over at the other four. "I see you have your friends here as well," he looked down at her.

"One of them I recognise as Miss Parvati Patil," he said, looking at the correct twin, "and this must be her 'brilliant and beautiful', as Parvati described you, sister, Padma," he said, looking at Padma, who blushed a deep scarlet.

"But who are your other friends?" He asked, and adding a mocked scandalised tone to his voice, "And one of them is a boy!"

Lavender turned around to look at the group and introduce them to Paulus. "This is my new friend, Luna Lovegood," she said.

Paulus took her hand and bowed down, "Miss Lovegood, it is my pleasure. You must be Xeno's girl."

Luna curtsied. "Lord Brown," she said, meeting his gaze, "the pleasure is mutual, and yes, Lord Lovegood is my father."

Lavender then tensed a bit, "And this is Harry Potter, Grand-papa. Harry, this is Lord Paulus Brown, Head of House Brown," she said, a slight blush rising to her cheeks.

Paulus moved to shake Harry's hand. He could not help but notice the heavy signet on the boy's ring finger. "Lord Potter," he said and began to kneel.

Harry took the older man's wrists in his hands, preventing him from kneeling. "Lord Brown, it is a pleasure to meet you. Please do not kneel in front of me unless the occasion requires it. To be perfectly

honest, there is no occasion I can think of which would ever require you to kneel before me. I prefer worthy advice to subservience," Harry said to the shocked Lord, who was hiding the emotional maelstrom rather well.

Paulus stood and looked Harry in the eye, "May I call you 'Harry'?" he asked.

"That would be appreciated," Harry said with a genuine smile.

"And please call me 'Paulus'. Lord Brown is for all of those," he paused and waved his hand downwards, "who feel such things are of importance."

"I have to say, Paulus, I am surprised by your presence here today," Harry said, raising an eyebrow as he looked to McGonagall still standing at the entrance.

"Well, the Deputy Headmistress told me of your decision and I came to tell the two of you to do as you are told, but the situation has changed," Paulus said, meaningfully looking at Harry's right hand.

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Harry asked McGonagall for an empty classroom to have a private meeting with Paulus, with the understanding that McGonagall would remain in the Infirmary with the girls in the event they needed to be evacuated.

Paulus cast the same wards he had done so when speaking with Minerva earlier. He was certain Harry did not want their conversation broadcast beyond the two of them.

Once behind privacy wards, Harry addressed the older man.

"Lord Brown, I am aware you renewed the oaths of fealty with my father. Do you wish to reaffirm those vows today?" Harry asked formally.

Paulus knew there was really no decision. Being sworn to the House of Potter had provided his family with a lucrative business by using charms only available through this arrangement. It would cut the

family income by over ninety percent were he to break with House Potter.

Paulus squared his shoulders. "I do, My Lord," he said formally.

"Before you do, do you have any oaths sworn which would conflict with the oaths you shall swear to me? This would include being a death eater, being sworn to the dark lord, or any oaths you may have sworn to Albus Dumbledore," Harry said.

Paulus was a bit surprised, but he took his oath to House Potter seriously. "I have sworn no oaths which conflict with my oaths or duties to either House Potter or House Brown," he explained.

"I am pleased to hear that, Paulus. I am ready to accept your oath of fealty," Harry said.

Paulus had learned this oath when he was a boy and could recite it forward and backward. He held his wand in his hand, concentrated on the entirety of the meaning of swearing fealty and recited the oath in a clear, strong voice.

"Here do I swear, on my magic and my lineage, fealty and service to the House of Potter. To speak and be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, to serve and to teach, in such matters that concern House Potter and House Brown; in need or in plenty, in peace or in war, in living or in dying, until the Houses are no more, death take me, or the world end. So say I, Paulus Martin, Lord of House Brown. So mote it be."

When he was done, the room seemed to thrum with the gathered magic.

"Here do I swear, on my magic and my lineage, to honour the oaths and do swear to uphold and keep safe and secure, the members of House Brown; to ensure the safety, integrity, and security of House Brown. To listen and consider, to teach and to learn, in such matters that concern House Potter and House Brown; in need or in plenty, in peace or in war, in living or in dying, until the Houses are no more, death take me, or the world end. So say I, Harry James, Lord of House Potter. So mote it be!" Harry recited from memory, the oath from the previous time line

Both of them could feel the magics rise to a crescendo before a pulse flared from the room. The castle rang like a bell.

Both Harry and Paulus were a bit wide-eyed. Harry had only felt a trickle the last time he had recited the oath. Paulus, for whom this was the third swearing of the vows to House Potter, had never before felt such a powerful surge of magic associated with an oath of fealty before.

Paulus stood, still slightly awed by the power of the oath, nevertheless, the safety of his great granddaughter was his highest immediate priority.

"My Lord, if I might ask, what your intentions are with Lavender?" he asked in a slightly subdued voice.

"It is my intention to keep her safe, Paulus. The staff at Hogwarts has proven on numerous occasions to be incapable of providing a safe environment. Therefore, I do not trust them to keep Lavender, or any of the other students, safe," Harry explained calmly.

"Malfoy assured us..." Paulus began but was cut off by Harry's raised hand.

"Paulus, if Lucius Malfoy told me the sky was blue, I would step outside and look to verify it and then check to ensure he had not paid someone to cast charms on my eyes or my spectacles. I cannot fathom you believing him," Harry said incredulously, knowing from his past that Paulus would sooner slit Lucius' throat than listen to his deceptions.

Paulus nodded, "I didn't fully believe him, but surely it isn't so bad the staff cannot be trusted."

"Paulus, Dumbledore has made grievous errors with regard to my family. My parents were hunted by the dark lord because of him. My mother and father were murdered because of him. The first eleven years of my life were physical and emotional torture because of him." Harry said venomously.

Paulus looked about to interrupt but Harry pressed on.

"Dumbledore left me with my mother's sister, whose family abhorred magic. I was 'the freak' and was made to live in a cupboard beneath the stairs and fed table scraps. I was beaten frequently, though never anything bad enough for the muggles to take official notice of in school," Harry said, taking a deep breath.

"Once I arrived at Hogwarts, I knew what it was to have friends, to be allowed to eat until I was full, to ask questions," Harry said, "but I also discovered it was Dumbledore who placed me there, Dumbledore who endangered every student here by bringing a dangerous object, guarded by dangerous creatures. All to entrap the dark lord," Harry finished. He was pleased that Paulus didn't flinch when he said the dark lord's name. "I would prefer you not discuss this with anyone, least of all Lavender."

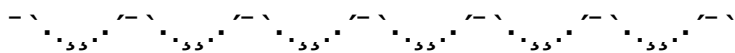
Paulus was concerned. "Does Lavender know any of this?"

Harry smiled, "No. Lavender is not known to be capable of keeping secrets very well."

Paulus nodded, then smiled, "I am glad she is fostering that belief. You would be amazed at the secrets that girl can keep," he said, looking at Harry meaningfully.

"I will consider it," Harry said.

Paulus suddenly pulled his wand out, spinning to face the door. "We are about to have company," he warned.



"Lavender, why would someone want to tint their skin?" Luna asked in genuine curiosity.

Lavender and Parvati both looked at Luna in surprise, wondering how Luna had heard their conversation with Hermione.

Padma was wondering what had prompted the question.

What caused all four girls to be shocked was Poppy's and Minerva's lengthy discussion on the pros and cons of skin tinting, various magical methods for tinting the skin and each of the options' durability and resilience.

"...and that is one of the reasons this new technique is better than the older spell options, because it will keep the skin tinted even through vigorous activities," Poppy paused as Minerva failed to stifle a giggle, then continued, "such as Quidditch or other strenuous activities causing perspiration," Poppy finished.

The two older witches looked up, realising the members of their captive audience were each staring at them.

Padma had several pieces of parchment around her, with an Ever-inking quill in her hand as she was taking notes on their conversation.

Luna appeared to be nodding in agreement with everything they said.

Lavender and Parvati were stunned. Here were two older witches who seemed to know more about makeup and looking beautiful than those hack writers at Witches' Weekly.

"You should both write articles for Witches' Weekly!" Lavender exclaimed.

"Miss Brown, young girls don't want to read beauty tips from mediwitches and professors who don't have the sense to retire," a smiling and slightly embarrassed Minerva said.

"No. Really! You should!" Parvati added. "You don't treat us like we're so uneducated we wouldn't understand the reason to do something. You taught me more about skin tinting in thirty minutes than I learned all year reading the series on the subject in this rag," she explained, crumpling the magazine up and tossing it into the bin.

The tone of Luna's voice caused the other conscious occupants of the Infirmary to look at her.

"Something is happening. Something is building. I can feel it. Be ready," Luna said in a monotone, looking at the far wall, only the whites of her eyes showing.

Padma drew her wand. She had been around Luna twice, now, when Luna said something abnormally, and each time she had



wished her wand was at the ready. This time, she would be prepared.

Suddenly, the very walls of the castle rang like a bell.

Luna, whose eyes had returned to normal, looked about in fear. "What was that?!" she asked, nearly petrified by the sound.

Minerva and Poppy, too, were afraid, but as they supposed to take charge when something unusual happened, they felt action was appropriate.

"Poppy, I am going to go to the Great Hall. When I leave, seal the doors behind me. I will transfigure them to stone, helping to ensure the safety of your patients, the girls, and you," Minerva explained.

"Wait!" Luna exclaimed, her voice quivering. "Harry's becoming angry. We need to go to him, or something will happen!" She stood and reached for Padma's free hand.

Padma took her hand, drawing comfort from the contact. "What did you see?" she asked.

"Grey mist. It's always been horrific when I can only see grey mist," Luna responded, her eyes haunted.

"Now see here, girls..." Minerva began but was cut off.

"You will take us to Lord Potter to ensure both his and our safety," Padma stated angrily. "We are under his protection, as specified by our fathers or our Lords. As you are well aware, I am certain, that also places a certain amount of responsibility on us to ensure his safety when we can. This is one of those times," she explained.

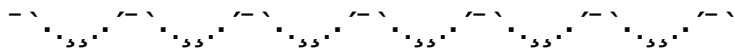
Minerva knew there was more to this situation than met the eye, and in any event, the girls would still be with her. "Very well, Miss Patil. Wands out. Parvati and Lavender will watch to our rear. Padma and Luna you will watch side corridors and assist me should we come under attack from in front," she instructed.

She nodded in satisfaction as the girls drew their wands and held them at the low ready. "At least someone taught them defence well," she thought.

She turned to Poppy, "Seal the door behind us. I shall still transfigure it to stone. Should anyone or anything attempt to get through the doors or the walls, call the elves to evacuate to the staff lounge."

"Are you certain, Minerva? They're all so young," Poppy said.

Luna looked up at Padma and pulled on her hand, "We have to go now!" she said urgently, pulling on the girl's hand.



Although both of them had turned to look at the door, the sound of a sharp knock caused them to jump a bit. Paulus removed the privacy wards and nodded at Harry. Harry stood behind the door and pulled it open, so that Paulus would be the first person framed in the door, his wand at the ready.

Minerva had her wand in her hand and was already casting when the door flew open at an unexpectedly fast pace.

"Expelliarmus!" Paulus shouted. Minerva's wand flew into his waiting hand. Minerva almost had her spell off, but Paulus was a hair faster. Minerva was tossed back, knocking Luna and Lavender off their feet.

Paulus was not fast enough to duck Parvati's hysterically-overpowered "Expelliarmus!" or Padma's "Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry came out from behind the door, his wand in his hand and his eyes glowing eerily, a fact not lost on Padma. Harry quickly surveyed the corridor and saw no one else was there.

He cast a, "Finite incantatem," at Paulus then walked over to help Luna and Lavender up from the floor.

"Minerva, my apologies," Paulus said, rushing forward and helping the slightly dazed witch get up off the floor.

When he reached down to help Luna and Lavender stand, they wrapped their arms around him and began crying incoherently. Padma and Parvati looked close to tears as they wrapped themselves around Lavender, Luna, and one another.

Minerva dusted herself off and looked at the five children with some concern.

"Minerva," Paulus said, his voice raised slightly, startling the witch, "has something happened requiring the evacuation of the Infirmary or did something else happen important enough to interrupt my meeting with Lord Potter?" he asked.

"My apologies. The castle rang. It only does that when there is a significant discharge of magic from within its walls. The girls became very agitated and insisted they come check on you and Harry," Minerva explained, a bit concerned about the reaction she would receive.

Paulus turned to look at his great granddaughter, who was being held in the arms of the boy to whom he just swore fealty. Although she was crying, she clearly wanted to be held by no one else. That Harry had clearly taken his responsibilities, regardless of his upbringing, seriously, Paulus was not concerned with Harry taking advantage of her.

"You did the right thing, Minerva," he said, turning back to the witch, who was also watching the children.

"What did the two of you discuss?" she asked quietly.

"I am afraid, Deputy Headmistress, that I am unable to discuss that with you at this time," he said formally, causing Minerva to turn her head and look at him as if he had grown a third eye.

"I am also affirming Lord Potter's decision to keep Lavender with him at all times," he continued, "and he has my full and complete trust with her care."

"But surely you don't..." Minerva began but was cut off by Paulus.

"You are not to discuss this with her parents, either," Paulus ordered. "They would unnecessarily worry about her safety and would likely decide it was best she be removed from Hogwarts entirely. This matter is closed for discussion, Deputy Headmistress."

Minerva nodded. She certainly could not go against a lord of an ancient and noble house, much less a member of the Board of Governors.

Paulus looked at the children again and noticed Lavender had calmed down considerably and had just finished kissing Harry on the cheek.

"Did anyone happen to notice where my wand went?" Paulus asked the children.

Parvati spoke but looked embarrassed. "I'm truly sorry, Lord Brown, but your wand is up there," she said, pointing to the ceiling, causing the rest of them to look up.

Embedded in the stone of the ceiling, the handle of the wand could be seen. "I see," Paulus said, hoping beyond hopes that his wand was still intact. He held his hand up towards the wand and willed it to come. A trail of dust began falling from the hole, then the wand rattled, popped free and leapt into Paulus' hand. Happily, the wand was undamaged. "Nothing a bit of polish won't fix," he said with a smile.

He then turned to the twins, "That was very good casting, Ladies. I am most impressed," he stated honestly.

He then turned his attention to his great-granddaughter. "Lavender?" Paulus asked loudly enough for the girl to hear him.

Lavender heard her great grandfather's voice and, from the tone, knew she wasn't in trouble. She looked at him and rushed over to him, wrapping her arms around him. "I was so worried about you and Harry, Grand-papa!" she exclaimed, as she reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

"I see that, Little Flower," he said, using his nickname for her.

She pushed away from him but held him at arm's length, "Grand-papa!" she exclaimed in a scandalised cry, blushing a rosy hue.

He pulled her back into a hug. "I have to go. Lord Potter has promised to keep you safe. Do as he says, as if he were me. Do you

understand?" he asked, gently pushing her away and holding her at arms-length as he looked seriously into her eyes.

Lavender's eyes grew wide. She understood the implications completely. She quickly schooled her features. "Yes, Grand-papa," she said, her eyes downcast.

Paulus smiled slightly, "Good. I hope to see you during the summer holidays," he said and released the girl. He turned to Harry and extended his hand. "By your leave, My Lord?" he asked.

Harry was still holding Luna with both arms. He released his right arm and shook hands with Paulus. "Take care, Lord Brown."

Paulus nodded then turned to Minerva, noting that Lavender was once again embracing Harry and Luna. "Minerva, I will show myself out. Do take good care of the school," he said.

Minerva nodded mutely at his departing back then turned to see Harry and all four girls in a group hug again.

She waited a few minutes before disturbing them because, in many ways, it was refreshing to see the boy getting the right kind of attention. "Girls. Lord Potter," she said.

Harry looked up at her.

"Shall we return to the Infirmary now?" she said, gesturing.

Harry nodded and gave Luna and Lavender a slight squeeze before releasing them. He then took hold of Padma and Parvati, who still seemed unsettled. "Shall we go?" he asked in a gentle tone.

All four girls nodded and the five of them walked, arm-in-arm, back to the Infirmary, followed by Minerva, who was trying to make heads and tails out of the sight before her.

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Once McGonagall escorted them back to the Infirmary and notified Madam Pomfrey they had returned, the five of them sat at the table the elves had provided next to Hermione's bed. Harry removed his

charms book and opened it to three-quarters of the way through and began reading.

Lavender and Luna were sitting on his left with Padma and Parvati sitting opposite the three.

Harry was leaning down towards Hermione's still form and read the book aloud while making the wand movements.

The four girls looked at one another with concern before Lavender made a motion to her friend and nodded towards Harry.

"Harry?" Parvati asked, when Harry had paused speaking for a moment.

Harry closed his book on a piece of parchment and looked up at her, giving her his entire attention. "Yes, Parvati?" he responded, causing the girl to flush at his intensity.

She looked up at Lavender then back to Harry. "Why did you do that for Luna, Lavender, Padma, and I? What did Lord Brown mean by Lavender had to obey you as if you were him? What aren't you telling us?" she asked adamantly before realising to whom she was speaking. That realisation caused her to look at Harry in fear, as if he were about to physically strike her, and look away.

He reached his hand across the table and took Parvati's hand, causing her to gasp at the unexpected gentleness and look at their joined hands, in awe at how wonderful his holding her hand felt. He spoke softly, "Parvati, please look at me."

She looked up to be mesmerised by his eyes. His eyes seemed to be glowing with an ethereal luminescence.

"Parvati, I cannot explain everything right now, but you know how I feel about Hermione," he said.

She nodded and smiled at how romantic his care of Hermione was, and once more looked down at their joined hands.

"I feel almost the same way about Luna," he began. Her eyes opened widely as she looked up once more into his eyes.

"I don't want anything happening to you, either. Or Padma. Or Lavender. I can't protect everyone, yet. And I can't tell you everything yet," he explained earnestly.

She nodded at him, not entirely able to believe he'd said those words.

Lavender had agreed earlier to let Parvati be their spokesperson, but she couldn't help herself. "What about Ron?" she blurted out.

Luna whimpered and grabbed hold of Harry's arm, sensing exactly how he felt.

Harry's expression flashed for a moment to something Parvati hoped was never directed at her or anyone else she cared about. Harry's face transformed to an insane, rage-filled expression before he smiled and looked at Lavender, squeezing Luna's hand. The other three girls had seen the same expression and their thoughts paralleled Parvati's.

"If you're referring to Ronald Bilius Weasley, he has done more to endanger My Hermione's life than any other student at this school. I see no reason, whatsoever, to provide him either my protection or any of my concern," Harry said with a calm he did not feel. He then smiled and kissed Luna on the top of her head before smiling at her. "Hey. My Little Pixel," he said to her.

She looked up at him and smiled nervously. He extricated his arm from her grip and wrapped it around her shoulders and pulled him to her. She closed her eyes and sighed, feeling how much Harry loved her.

Harry looked up from Luna at Parvati, whose hand he still held. "Parvati, I can't answer your questions just yet, but I promise I will tell you everything I can, when I can," he said earnestly. "I know I am asking a lot from you," he looked at Lavender, Padma, and Luna before returning his gaze to Parvati, "all of you."

Luna snuggled into his side, a contented smile on her face, and her eyes closed. She clearly fully trusted the boy next to whom she was sitting.

"But I do believe I know what I am doing and I will protect all of you with everything I am and everything I have," his voice and his eyes momentarily hardened as he seemed to look off into infinity and see things they could not, "and should anyone attempt to bring harm to any of you, they shall have no quarter from me whatsoever."

Once more he looked at Parvati and his face softened. "I care very much for all of you," he said, as he extricated his hand from Parvati's and gently cupped her cheek.

She couldn't help but close her eyes and melt into his hand. He was so gentle and he was doing and saying almost everything she wished him to.

She didn't know how long she sat there, daydreaming about the warm hand that was softly touching her face, but Harry's voice cut through her thoughts.

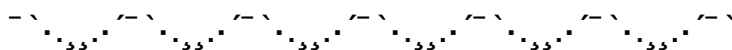
"Hey there, Beautiful. Come back to the waking world," he said.

Her eyes fluttered open and she lifted her head from his hand, but his hand followed and slowly stroked down her face, causing her eyes to close once more. A lone finger softly languished from her lips to her collarbone before losing contact with her. She shivered and opened her eyes.

"We should finish our homework while we await Hagrid. Don't you think?" Harry asked, a small smile on his face.

Parvati looked at Harry in embarrassment before noticing Padma had her eyes closed and her arm around Luna while Lavender was, once more, sitting next to her and looking at her.

Parvati blushed but quickly busied herself getting her books from her bag while, internally, Harry was smiling. "Two more I can save," he thought.



A~~~~~N

In a private message, someone suggested the girls were far too emotional for 11 through 13 year old. My response was that they were either unfamiliar with the pubescent emotional destabilisation which occurs in girls, or they were rewriting their own memories to forget the emotional upheavals young girls display. I can assure you all, here and now, that, if anything, the length and intensity of the girls' emotional outbursts are quite shortened and lessened. I am somewhat of a surrogate auntie for a number of the girls in the village and many of them can cry for hours over the most trivial of issues. How the lives of public figures can effect them so profoundly is amusing to me at times, but we are talking about children.

An example from canon is Hermione's emotional meltdown which led, ultimately, to the troll incident in the girls' loo. She was having a pity party from before lunch to just after dinner. Now, I do imagine she likely napped for a bit of that time, and usually, girls seem to pull themselves together after a good cry and a short nap. Not all of them, and clearly Hermione falls into this category. These girls can cry, nap, cry, fall asleep for the night, cry, eat breakfast, cry, nap, cry, nap, snuggle, cry, nap, etc. Usually, If a girl has exhibited this type of behaviour in the past, I give them an age-suitable multivitamin and that seems to help stabilise them. Puberty can do especially odd things to a girl's body, the symptoms can be much harsher, and the symptoms tend to last longer for girls than for boys.

Please keep this in mind while reading this, and other, stories involving younger children.

One of the things which will begin to annoy Harry is his drastically changing hormones. For those of you who don't believe hormonal changes have an effect on emotions, you're either a bachelor, in denial, or you're likely male and less than 16 years old. No offence intended.

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## Chapter 6 – A New Day Dawns

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Cadet Auror First Class Nymphadora Tonks was not having a good day. First, she had been called in on her day off to take someone to Azkaban, only to find out it was one of her favourite people from Hogwarts, Rubeus Hagrid. When she discovered the reason for it, she contacted her superior, who, in turn contacted his superior, who in turn contacted Senior Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Kingsley was livid that he had orders to take a man to the island prison without even the courtesy of a hearing, much less any substantive evidence to indicate he had done any of the actions for which he was being accused. He was on his way to the holding cells but decided to turn around.

He was just about to go discuss the issue with Amelia Bones, the Director of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, when Cadet Auror Third Class Crusher came running down the corridor.

"Sir! Wait! The Minister has ordered that the prisoner not be taken to Azkaban, but returned to Hogwarts instead. The Minister also heard you were here and wants you to handle this personally," the newest member of the Aurors said breathlessly.

"Did the Minister say anything else?" Kingsley asked, dreading the possible answer.

Crusher nodded, "He said you are to take at least two aurors with you and to remain at the school to bolster security and await further instructions." The young man then snapped his fingers. "Oh yes! And you're supposed to take the prisoner to the Infirmary at the school. There is a Lord there waiting for him."

Kingsley looked at the young man who was clearly desperate to be one of the aurors to go on this detail. "Very well, Crusher. You and Cadet Auror First Class Tonks will be coming with me..." he began, but was cut off by the over-eager auror.

"Oh! Thank you! Sir! Thank you!" he exclaimed.

Kingsley rolled his eyes, "Go let the watch desk know where we are going and leave a message with them to let Director Bones I need to speak with her at her earliest convenience."

"Yes! Sir!" Crusher said and ran off down the corridor.

Kingsley watched the young man disappear down the hall and wondered if he himself had been that exuberant when he had first started twenty-two years ago. He shook his head and walked back into the cell block where Tonks was waiting.

As he walked, he thought about his orders. Taking an innocent man back to the school and handing him over to a Lord sounded very much like a political manoeuvre. Kingsley hated the political aspects of his job, but was realistic enough to understand that, as a senior auror, politics was one of the primary factors he had to consider as part of his job.

Upon entering, Kingsley saw Tonks and explained, "Change in plans. We're taking him back to Hogwarts instead." He then looked into the cell to see who the prisoner was.

Tonks had known Kingsley was angry about the situation before. Now she got to see him lose his cool for the first time in her year with the aurors.

"Simpson! Get your arse over here and get this cell unlocked immediately or you'll be walking twelve hour shifts in Knockturn Alley!" Kingsley shouted.

A portly auror came rushing out of his cubicle with a ring of large keys. "I'm coming!" he shouted. Simpson hated walking and was scared of his own shadow in Knockturn Alley.

The now-sweating man had the cell unlocked in record time.

"Good job, Simpson. Thank you," Kingsley said as he got control of his anger once again.

He opened the door. Hagrid was sitting down, but was clearly afraid of what the door opening meant. He looked up into Kingsley's face and it was evident Hagrid was terrified.

"Let me put your mind at ease, my friend," Kingsley all but whispered. "I am to take you back to Hogwarts, not Azkaban." He watched as the expression on Hagrid's face turned from fear to

wonder. "Let me take those off," Kingsley said, indicating the manacles the gamekeeper was wearing.

Hagrid held his hands up and Kingsley removed the shackles and pulled on the half-giant's hands to get him to stand. Kingsley gestured for Hagrid to leave the cell ahead of him.

The three of them waited for Crusher to return before the four of them went to the auror floo and walked to Hogwarts from Hogsmeade. Hagrid was all but crying in happiness as the castle came into sight.

"I can na' believe Dumbledore managed to get me released so quickly!" Hagrid said, speaking for the first time.

"I don't think it was Dumbledore, Hagrid," Kingsley said. "I am supposed to turn you over to a Lord who is waiting in the Infirmary."

Hagrid stopped walking and looked down at Kingsley in shock, "Not Malfoy! Please, Kingsley. You can't hand me over to Malfoy!" Hagrid exclaimed.

Kingsley patted Hagrid on the arm, "Hagrid, I wouldn't leave you in the same room alone with Malfoy. We both know he and his ilk are not to be trusted."

Hagrid was once more relieved and began walking again, not noticing that Tonks had slapped Crusher's wand from his hand, which he had drawn when Hagrid had stopped and shouted at Kingsley.

Kingsley, however, had noticed and would be having a serious conversation with the two of them when they were finished here.

Minerva, having been warned by the wards that someone had entered, met them at the Entry Hall. Her smile at Hagrid's return was wide. "Hagrid, it is good to have you back!" she said, then looked at the auror contingent. "Senior Auror Shacklebolt, are you here simply to escort Hagrid back?" she asked.

Kingsley shook his head then explained his instructions. Seeing the worried look on her friend's face, she provided him some relief. "Hagrid, there is no need for concern. The Lord in question

genuinely counts you as a trusted friend," but would not answer his question as to who it was.

Hagrid could not think of any of the members of the Wizengamot, save Dumbledore, who would think of him as a friend.

Minerva escorted the four of them to the Infirmary and held the door open for them. Hagrid entered first and saw the five students sitting and studying.

He was quite surprised at his reception.

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Harry and Luna had been taking turns reading to Hermione and the others. Padma, Parvati, and Lavender were enraptured by the story when the doors to the Infirmary opened.

Harry stopped reading and looked up, his wand in his hand. He saw his first-ever friend enter and look around. Although he thought he had mentally prepared himself for this moment, nothing really prepared Harry to see his long-dead friend alive again. He returned his wand to its holster, stood, placed the bookmark in the book and set it down on his chair.

The four girls had looked up when Harry stopped reading to see Hagrid enter. They turned to look at Harry and all four were surprised the boy had a tear running down his face.

"Harry?" Luna asked in concern.

Harry silently and woodenly walked over. Once he was close enough, he reached out a hand to touch Hagrid's hand. When his hand came into contact, the dam holding back his tears burst and he embraced the gentle giant. Hagrid looked down at the boy with uncertainty before nervously patting him on the back. "'ello 'Arry," he said.

Harry was overcome with a flurry of emotions, but was trying to collect himself, which took several minutes. Once he had his emotions in check once more, he looked up. "Hagrid, it's so good to have you back!" he exclaimed.

"It's good to be back, 'Arry an' I'm glad to see you," Hagrid responded, then looked around the ward again.

McGonagall watched this reunion and couldn't help but think something was off about the way Harry had greeted Hagrid, but couldn't quite place what it was.

Harry stood back and noticed Hagrid seemed to be looking for something and asked "What are you looking for, Hagrid?"

"I'm supposed t' be meetin' a Lord 'ere, 'Arry. I's wha' kep' me from Azkaban," Hagrid explained.

Minerva stepped in and helped out with the situation. "Hagrid, it was Lord Potter who insisted you be returned to Hogwarts."

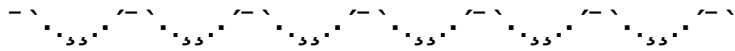
Hagrid turned around and looked at McGonagall, "Lord Pot..." he began then looked back down at Harry, "'Arry? You're Lord Potter now?" he asked, slightly surprised.

Harry was nodding in confirmation then took a step away from Hagrid. He looked past Hagrid and saw by whom he was accompanied then looked back at Hagrid, "I see you brought some friends with you, Hagrid."

Hagrid looked about to explain when Harry returned his attention to the aurors. "Thank you for returning Master Hagrid. We need to discuss a private matter," he said dismissively before turning his attention to McGonagall.

"Deputy Headmistress, thank you, as well, for bringing Master Hagrid to me. I hope that, once I explain his role and what I need him to do, the girls and I can retire to a private set of suites. It should have at least eight bedrooms, one of which will need to be configured as a master suite. All of the rooms will require their own private bath. I am well aware such accommodations are available and am happy to pay the additional tuition costs for them. I expect the elves can have them ready by the time dinner is over this evening," he said with a tone of finality.

Harry didn't think McGonagall's features could become more pinched. She did, however, nod and leave the Infirmary, aurors in tow.



Once the doors to the Infirmary were closed, McGonagall cast a privacy charm on the outside of the door and stopped.

"Kingsley, while I trust Hagrid to keep them safe," she said, then meaningfully looked at Crusher, "could we leave someone here to guard the Infirmary?"

"My thoughts exactly, Deputy Headmistress," Shacklebolt said, then looked at Crusher. "Crusher, I want you to stay here and ensure Lord Potter and his company remain safe. Hagrid will likely remain within the confines of the Infirmary to protect the students who've been petrified."

"Sir! Yes Sir!" Crusher exclaimed excitedly.

"Crusher, have you eaten lunch today?" Kingsley asked, knowing aurors rarely got the opportunity to eat a midday meal due to the staffing issues.

"No sir," Crusher said somewhat dejectedly.

Kingsley looked to Minerva.

"Nappy," Minerva called.

A petite house elf appeared. "How can Nappy help?" she asked.

"Nappy, please prepare a small table in the corridor here and provide Auror Crusher with a hot meal and some butter beer," Minerva said.

"Nappy will have it done," the elf said. She snapped her fingers, and disappeared. A few moments later, a table, chair, steaming hot meal and ice-cold mug of butter beer were in the corridor.

Crusher was in the process of sitting down when he remembered where he was and with whom. He made to stand again before Kingsley froze him.

"Crusher, sit down and eat. We'll either send relief at dinner or shortly thereafter," Kingsley said and waited until he sat and began eating his meal before he gestured for Minerva and Nymphadora to walk away. They both looked at him quizzically, but did, in fact, walk away.

Kingsley bent down right next to a very nervous Cadet Auror Third Class Crusher. "Cadet Crusher, let me explain something to you very clearly," he whispered in an iron tone. "The man we escorted here is known to me as being a solid, law-abiding person. While I can appreciate the care and concern you demonstrated for Cadet Tonks and myself, do not make the mistake of drawing a wand on someone under the protection of the Lord of an ancient and noble house. Especially when that Lord is the Boy-Who-Lived and the person under his protection is a close, personal friend of mine."

Crusher turned with eyes opened wide in surprise and fear to look directly into the steely eyes of the number two person in the DMLE.

"That's correct. Rubeus Hagrid and I went to Hogwarts together and our friendship is just as strong as my friendship with Albus Dumbledore. So, if you pull your wand in his presence, it had best be to protect him, and not to attack him. Do I make myself clear, Cadet Crusher?"

"Crystal, Sir," Crusher said nervously.

"Good," Kingsley said, standing up and clapping the cadet on the shoulder. "Now eat your lunch while it's still warm. Stay alert. If you see or hear anything unusual, call a house elf and go into the Infirmary. You are not to play investigator or hero, but you are also not to disturb Healer Pomfrey, Master Hagrid, or any of the students unnecessarily," he ordered.

"Yes, Sir!" Crusher exclaimed.

Kingsley turned and walked to where the two witches were waiting, at the end of the hall. He shook his head and looked at Tonks with a slight smile.

Once they were out of listening range, Tonks wryly asked, "Was I ever that excitable?"



"Hagrid, I know you are not responsible for the petrification of the

It was clear to Harry that Hagrid had never heard this from anyone

"I also know," Harry continued, "that the last time this happened, you

"This time it was within my power to prevent. But to keep them from

"I can't go back to Azkaban, 'Arry. I jus' can't!" Hagrid cried.

"Hagrid, you know Harry. He wouldn't ever do anything to hurt you.

Hagrid closed his eyes. His arms were held rigidly at his sides,

Finally, Hagrid opened his eyes and looked at Harry. "I'll swear the

Finally, Hagrid opened his eyes and looked at Harry. "I'll swear the oath, 'Arry. You've always looked ou' fer me before," Hagrid said. "What do I need to do?"

Harry removed a piece of parchment from his pocket and unfolded it. "This is the oath of fealty used by the House of Potter since the ninth century. I wrote it out for you in advance, hoping you would be open to swearing fealty," Harry explained.

"Thank you, 'Arry," Hagrid said gratefully. He took the parchment and read it through. He then read it a second time, his lips moving to the words.

Hagrid looked up from the parchment, concern etched into his face, "I don't have a wand, 'Arry."

"Oath magic doesn't require a wand, Hagrid. Oath magic is intent-based. Even squibs can swear a magical oath," Luna explained.

The relief on Hagrid's face was obvious. "What do I need to do?" he asked.

Luna stepped forward and to one side and explained, "You need to kneel before Harry, hold your hands clasped before you and, with your eyes downcast, say the oath. Once that is done, Harry will formally accept the oath and the two of you will be bound by it."

Hagrid knelt and set the parchment on the floor so he could read it. He clasped his hands together and, in a clear and steady voice, read out the oath.

"I, Rubeus Robert Hagrid, swear upon my life and my magic that I will, from this day forward to the ending of the world, be faithful and true, and love all that the House loves, and shun all that the House shuns, and never, by will nor by force, by word nor by work, do ought of what is loathful to the House; on condition that the House keep me as I am willing to deserve, and all that fulfil that our agreement was, when I to the House submitted and chose the House's will. I shall obey the will of the House of Potter, to never cause the House or its members harm and will observe my homage to the House completely against all persons in good faith and without deceit. So mote it be." Hagrid felt something within him shift, as if something had been partially released. He heard a buzzing and could feel the hairs of his arms standing on edge, as if the air were filled with electricity.

While Luna had expected there to be magic charging the air, she had not expected, based on her readings on the subject, the magic to be so strong. Padma, Parvati, and Lavender were also surprised by the building magic and approached, surrounding Harry.

Harry stepped forward and placed his hand upon Hagrid's shoulder, "I, Harry James Potter, Lord of House Potter, declare it is right and fit that those who offer to us unbroken fidelity should be protected by our aid."

The magic in the air continued to build. The four girls felt a deep thrumming emanating from Harry as he continued the acceptance of the oath.

"And since Rubeus Robert Hagrid freely chooses to become a faithful one of ours, by the favour of life and magic, coming here in our presence with his heart bared, has seen fit to swear trust and fidelity to us in our hand, therefore we decree and command by the present precept that from now to the ending of the world, Rubeus Robert Hagrid shall be counted as a member of House Potter. And if anyone perchance should presume to bear him harm, deceit, or death, let him know that he will be judged guilty and shall know no rest from prosecution by House Potter and all who owe allegiance. So say I, Harry James Potter, Lord of House Potter. So mote it be."

The magic had reached a crescendo and caused a bright cyan flash to wash over Hagrid as the castle rang once more.

Hagrid's eyes flared wide. Whatever it was which had been moved before was now torn aside and tossed away on the wind of magic washing over him. The bindings on his magic had been removed!

He felt Harry squeeze his shoulder. "Arise, Rubeus Robert Hagrid, newest member of House Potter," Harry said with a smile.

Hagrid shakily picked up the parchment and stood unsteadily. He looked down at Harry, "I kin feel all of my magic agin, 'Arry," he said, a tone of awe in his voice.

"Yes, Hagrid, I know. As soon as we have cleared your name from the first time the Chamber was opened, you will be getting a new wand and a tutor to help you master your magic," Harry explained.

Tears came unbidden to Hagrid's eyes, but Harry was not yet finished.

"Hagrid, I need you to ensure Hermione and these other students are unharmed while I am away. I will also want you to watch over these girls," Harry said, indicating Luna, Lavender, Padma, and Parvati, "when I am not available. When watching over the petrified students, I would like you to read to them from the text for the care and feeding of magical creatures class. We will leave a copy of it on Hermione's work table." Harry gestured towards the table where the book in question rested.

"For now, you should go eat, get your crossbow and Fang, and come back here to the Infirmary. Once you return, the five of us will go down to dinner," Harry explained.

Hagrid, still a bit awed, turned and left to go as Harry had indicated. Just as he was about to open the door, it flew open and he had a distraught Professor Vector slam into him, crying and holding on to him for all she was worth.

Hagrid put his arms around her and gently patted her back, "Perfessor Vector, ever-thin' is fine," he grumbled softly, trying to comfort her.

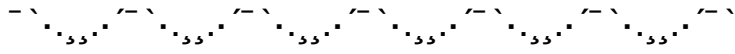
After a few minutes of soft sobbing, in which Harry and the girls decided a strategic withdrawal was in order, Hagrid finally managed to get her calm.

"Oh, Rubeus, I am sorry," Septima said, sniffing a bit, "it's just that Minerva said the aurors had taken you away to Azkaban and I saw her in the Great Hall and she told me the aurors with her had brought you back and I couldn't bear the thought of you being taken away." She looked up at him and wiped her eyes.

"There, there. Not'ing t' fergive," he replied. "Young 'Arry made them t' bring me back!" He exclaimed, then had an idea. "I nee' t' get some thin's from me 'ut then come back t' 'ere. Woul' ya like t' come wi' me?" he asked.

She took as much of his hand in hers, which was three fingers, "I'd like that very much, Rubeus," she said shyly.

Hagrid looked down at Septima then looked over at Harry and the girls, who were sitting down and studying or reading. He quietly led Septima out of the Infirmary.



Hagrid returned two hours later, a slightly bemused smile gracing his lips, seemingly prepared for war. In addition to his crossbow and Fang, his less-than-brave hound, he now wore crossed swords on his back and had brought an entire barrel of crossbow bolts. He also swore to Harry on his life that no one would get to his friends who meant them harm.

Before disembarking for the Great Hall, Harry looked at the four girls, then with a crooked smile had said, "That will never do."

Lavender and Parvati suddenly found themselves wearing cloaks matching Padma's and Luna's, with the only difference being the red and gold of Gryffindor house. The red was the bright crimson of free-flowing blood and the gold appeared as bright as if it was still liquid from the forge. They could also feel the cut and fit of their clothing had changed and almost felt like a second skin.

The coat of arms over their hearts left no doubt as to which house was responsible for their protection.

When Harry offered his arms to the girls, it was Luna who had the courage to explain the reason none of them would take his arm.

"Harry, it is clear to us that you care for us, but it should be eminently clear to everyone else which witch has your heart. None of us are vying to take Hermione's place directly beside you," Luna said calmly.

"Luna, I am a bit out of my depth here. How do you propose we walk to dinner?" Harry asked, slightly confused, but understanding the girls' position. "We can't enter the Great Hall the same way we entered at breakfast because I only have two arms," he explained, smiling.

"You will precede us, Padma and I will walk behind you and Lavender and Parvati will walk behind us. This is only proper since Padma is the elder of the twins and Parvati and Lavender were

friends long before I knew them," Luna explained, wishing she could hold onto his arm and feel the warmth and comfort being in physical contact with him brought.

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "There is something I am missing here," he thought to himself, trying to remember everything Augusta Longbottom had drilled into him about pureblood culture in the three months prior to his being married to Ginny. "Something to speak with Gringott's about," his thoughts concluded.

"We'll try it your way, Luna," Harry said in agreement.

All four girls breathed a silent breath of relief.

Harry entered the Great Hall with the four girls trailing behind him. He noted there was space at the near end of the Gryffindor table and headed there. He offered his hand to help each of the girls sit, with Parvati and Lavender sitting across from him and Luna and Padma sitting on either side of him. He looked out of the corner of his eye and noticed Ginny was watch him with open curiosity.

While his initial instinct was to shun her, Luna's distraught words played across his mind. "Save everyone you can."

Ginny was shocked by Harry addressing her, "How are your classes, Ginevra? Are you enjoying your first year at Hogwarts?" he asked. He only had to raise his voice slightly to be heard over the din of the hall.

A brief smile appeared on her face as she nodded, only to be quickly replaced by a nervous frown. She looked away and began a conversation with another first year girl, studiously ignoring Harry and the girls.

He felt Luna take his hand under the table and give it a squeeze. He looked over to see her looking at him sadly. "Her brothers haven't spent much time with her and I think she's a bit lonely," Luna explained. She then got a far-away look and, in an emotionless voice said, "It is not yet time. You will know." She shook her head, as if to clear it. She shivered and scooted closer to Harry, "It's drafty and I'm cold."

Harry lifted the cloak from around his shoulders and wrapped both of them in it. "Stay warm, My Little Pixel. I don't want you getting sick," he said with a look of concern, both at her shivering and at her words.

Luna cuddled in closer, leaving Harry no choice but to put his arm around her and eat one-handed. He had just picked up a forkful of food while considering the changes to the timeline he was already experiencing when another change nearly leapt down his throat.

"What's the matter? No room at the 'claws table for Loony Lovegood? Why don't you shove off so I can sit next to my friend?" Ron brayed loudly.

Luna tensed at the intrusion and began to pull away from Harry as if to stand, but his arm around her shoulders held her fast to his side.

Harry removed his wand from his robes and pointed it at his own throat, and cast "Sonorous". He then spoke, his words heard by all in a normal volume of conversation, "Ronald Bilious Weasley, in addition to your being rude to my new friend, Miss Lovegood, your manners are atrocious, and your attitude abysmal. You will find yourself in significant difficulties should you insult or attempt to injure anyone wearing the crest of House Potter."

"What? Your new friends more important than me? What about Hermione? Have you abandoned her, too?" Ron said antagonistically, not realising the danger he was putting himself in.

Harry squeezed Luna's hand, slid his cloak from his shoulders and placed it around Luna's shoulders as he stood, now slightly taller and broader in shoulder than Ron. Harry had noticed the Deputy Headmistress was now standing from her meal and appeared to be headed to the Gryffindor table, but decided now was as good a time as any to warn people off.

"You want confrontation, you idiotic, toffee-nosed, sadistic, conniving, dishonest, backstabbing, lying, murdering bastard? You're fucking-well going to get it!" Harry thought vehemently. "Time for some blunt language everyone will understand."

"Were you actually a true friend, the way Miss Granger is a true friend, you would not question my motives, my friends, or my

intentions. If you were a true friend, you would treat me with the respect with which I have treated you in the past. You would refer to me as 'Brother' and not 'Oy Potter'. You would, at all times and without reservation, treat me as a friend," Harry said, seething at the thought that this piece of filth, in a different incarnation, had murdered his Hermione.

McGonagall paused halfway to the Gryffindor table. She had no intention of coming to the immediate attention of a now-upset Lord of an ancient and noble house whose magic, according to Poppy, was still likely unstable and massively more powerful than Albus.

"Just because you have money..." Ron began haughtily, but found he could no longer speak. He felt as if a hand were gripping his throat and squeezing just hard enough to constrict his breathing. He then rose to balance on his toes as it relieved, slightly, the pressure on his throat.

"I haven't decided whether your attitude is simply your being selfish or if you're merely both better and more sinister in your methods of hiding your views about blood purity. Are you greedy, or evil merely wrapping yourself in a cloak of light."

"Time to wrap this in nice language that even Crabbe and Goyle would understand," Harry thought. "Transitioning to Wizengamot speech to ensure everyone who was raised in the magical world knows precisely what I am saying without having to come out and tell them I will decapitate them with a rusting spoon if they piss me off," he thought, a smirk growing on his face for a moment, to face down the boy who would grow into the man who murdered, in cold blood, the woman he loved.

Harry stepped over the bench and looked into Ron's eyes as he strained to breathe. "You have truly made an indelible impression on your peers at Hogwarts, with your blatant stupidity, Weasley," Harry seethed.

"Yes, I have money. I have wealth. I have property. But at what cost, Weasley? My parents and all four of my grandparents were murdered by a half-blood psychopath while I was sentenced to nine and a half years of misery, neglect, and abuse. You have parents who dote on you, brothers who look out for you, and a sister that



loves you even though you ignore her," Harry said in a dangerously quiet voice that carried throughout the hall due to the spell.

Ron was still grabbing at his throat, but his eyes were wide at the admission of the now-larger boy standing before him.

"As to Miss Hermione Jane Granger, not only would I never abandon her, she is my best and truest friend and will be so to the end of my days. The way you have, so casually and frequently in the past, abandoned her and me is in direct contrast to the friendship Miss Granger and I share. Should anyone intend her or anyone under my protection harm, I shall bring the full weight of House Potter, and all other houses so sworn in loyalty and service, against them. The screams of pain and howls of anguish on any so foolish will be a testament to my relentless and unforgiving response, and they shall have the same mercy they would provide to me. None at all," Harry said, the fury in his voice as white hot as iron in a crucible, his aura becoming visible.

He surveyed the room, ignoring the strangling boy in front of him, dwelling on both Ravenclaw and Slytherin. His voice took on a softer, more congenial timbre, "In the spirit of charity and good will, I will forgive past transgressions, save two. These petty jibes and verbal insults of the past. The childish jinxes cast at the backs of defenceless students. All forgiven," he said, theatrically wiping his hands across one another in an exaggerated fashion, "Today wipes the slate clean."

Harry paused for a moment, and looked at Ron's feeble attempts to grab at his own throat to ease his breathing before continuing, again dwelling on the Slytherin table.

"To all of you in Slytherin, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, and the staff of Hogwarts, this forgiveness is extended," Harry said, pausing specifically as he looked at Draco and nodded and then again at Severus and nodded, "All is forgiven," he paused looking at the potions master, who swallowed nervously.

Harry's gaze once more swept the room. "The attack by the self-proclaimed Dark Lord is unforgivable. Had he managed to end my life that Halloween these eleven years ago, there would have been nothing to forgive, because he would have completed the job and I would now be with my parents, happily swaddled in the oblivion of

death," Harry said, looking over the head table slowly and pausing at each set of eyes.

His voice hardened once more and rose in volume. "But he failed! He and his followers are cowardly. They are so pathetic and stupid that they could not even kill a toddler. I tell you all now," he said, once more looking over the Slytherin table, "I stand here tonight, unafraid. Should he attack the weak, or those under my protection, only pain and death shall he know, and the agony and the terror he experiences will be the spark that forges a legend," Harry's eyes were now glowing green with power.

"For what he and his followers did, they and all who swear allegiance to him, shall know no quarter and no escape. Their horrified cries will seem like a choir being tuned before I destroy them utterly. The streets will run with the blood of his slain followers. They have incurred my wrath and my fury shall rain down upon their heads with great vengeance and unrepentant anger."

Harry looked up at the ceiling in the Great Hall as he continued, "A new era dawns. Any transgression made from this moment until the ending of the world against me, against House Potter, against those under the protection of House Potter, against those who have sworn loyalty to House Potter, shall be met with a measured and just response based on the Accords of the Long Hall, as set down by the Houses of Potter, Longbottom, Bones, and Lovegood," Harry paused and looked down to the stone floor as gasps could be heard from the children of pureblood families. "Vide inimicos meos in ira mea! So mote it be!" he exclaimed, his wand appeared in his hand and a maelstrom of magic poured out of him, struck the ceiling of the Great Hall, seemingly without ill effect, and flowed down the walls, across the floor and back to him. He lowered his wand and looked around the room once more.

"Some might accuse me of going dark. Or revelling in the pain of my enemies. Nothing could be farther from the truth," Harry explained. "The simple fact is that I have responsibilities, which I regard most seriously."

"One only has to look around this hall at some of those present. Look at the heir of the House of Malfoy," Harry nodded towards Draco, "or the heir of the House of Zabini," Harry nodded towards Blaise, "or the heir of the House of Bones," Harry directed his

attention to Susan at the Hufflepuff table and smiled, "or the heir of the House of Longbottom," Harry moved to stand behind Neville and placed his hands on Neville's shoulders, "to see other examples of young men and women who take their responsibilities to their House with great seriousness."

"I tell you here and now, I am no darker than these four. And, should they seek out my friendship, no more loyal a friend shall they know, than House Potter," Harry explained, looking about the room, but specifically catching Susan's, Hannah's, Blaise's and Draco's eyes and squeezing Neville's shoulders before walking back to where Ron still struggled to breathe.

"And for those who would seek to attack my friends, or dissuade them from remaining my friends through villainy, they will be witness to just how brightly the force of the Light can shine within House Potter and those so aligned, burning the very lives and souls out of those who would bestow darkness in their path," Harry finished.

He looked about the Hall once more before his gaze fell upon Ron. Harry then cancelled the Sonorus.

"Pray, Weasley, that you and members of your house are not amongst them." He then looked back to his place at the table. This seemed to release the choke hold on Ron, causing the redhead to collapse to his knees.

"Mr. Weasley! What is the meaning of this disturbance and your rudeness towards fellow students?" Minerva exclaimed indignantly. "Detention every night this week for your egregious behaviour."

She then turned to Harry, who was sitting down once again between Luna and Padma. "Lord Potter, I would like to speak with you later this evening."

Harry nodded and sat down, once more wrapping his arm around Luna and kissing her on the forehead. "How are you, My Little Moon?" Harry asked softly. Behind him, McGonagall was not yet done with Ron.

"Mr. Weasley, since there are no seats available at this end of the table, you will sit at the end of the table closest to the head table so

that, when I am done with my meal, you may accompany me to your detention," the stern witch stated with a glare.

"But Professor..." Ron began, but was cut off by McGonagall's temper.

"Mr. Weasley, there will be no argument. I have instructed you what you will do and you will do it or I will floo home to your parents to explain the reasons you are being suspended for arguing with a professor. The correct response to my instructions to you is 'Yes, Professor'. Do you understand?" McGonagall asked angrily.

Sullenly, Ron replied, "Yes, Professor."

"Excellent. Now go sit up there," McGonagall pointed imperiously towards the end of the table nearest the head table.

Ron gave Harry a scathing look as he skulked to where he was to sit.

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Harry pulled Luna up against him again, both to keep her warm and to let her know he would never abandon her.

Harry picked up his fork again and noticed the girls were all looking at him somewhat askance. "Ladies, is something the matter?" he asked in concern.

"Harry," Padma began timidly, "not to sound silly, but what just happened?" she asked quietly, clearly afraid of him exploding at her.

He turned fully towards her and placed his fingertips on her cheeks and kissed her on the forehead and then rested his forehead against hers. "Padma," he whispered, "you need never fear me for I shall never bring harm to you nor raise a hand against you. Please don't be afraid of me."

The two of them looked into one another's eyes searchingly.

Padma closed her eyes and tilted her head, wanting to just brush her lips gently across Harry's, but opened her eyes when she felt her lips press against his fingertips.

"No matter how much I would like to do that, Padma, it wouldn't be proper," he said, a sad smile on his lips, "not yet."

She leaned back and looked away, nodding, but also seemed about to cry. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him, doing the same with Luna on his other side. He closed his eyes and gathered his thoughts.

"I can't explain everything, but tonight I will explain what I am able to. I know that, although we've been going to school together for more than a year now, you've only really met me this morning. I know it's a lot to ask, but I need you to trust me. I have reasons for everything I do, and some of those reasons I can tell you tonight when the five of us are alone. Can you trust me until then?" he asked, sincerely hoping he had not alienated or frightened any of them away.

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He looked at Luna first.

Luna looked up at Harry and couldn't help but think of the changes he had brought about in just the first ten minutes of knowing her.

Growing up at The Rookery, she had only ever had one friend who was real, and Ginny's twin brothers had released a boggart at Ginny's seventh birthday party that had somehow focused on her instead of any of the Weasleys.

Luna had run from The Burrow as fast as she could, her heart hammering in her chest, as the boggart chased her relentlessly to the ward line at home. It wasn't the ward line that had stopped the boggart, though.

She remembered as if it was this morning. The gentle giant that was Father must have somehow sensed she was in danger. She had never seen Father angry or upset before. He said he could feel her terror as she approached and when she saw him, she watched as he turned from a concerned parent into something she couldn't put into words at the time. He was an enraged, angry beast.

Her relief at seeing Father didn't cause her to stop running.

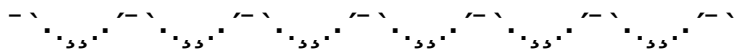
Father's wand appeared in his hand and an enormous red beam passed over her head and she heard an impossibly loud whoosh and felt wetness splatter the back of her legs and head. She continued to run until Father's arms were wrapped around her. She hadn't realised she had been crying, but she knew one thing: when she was in Father's arms, nothing could hurt her.

Once she had calmed down enough, she turned in his embrace, expecting to see the monster which had been chasing her to be waiting at the ward line. Instead, there was a steaming, smoking crater.

For the first time in her life, she felt loved by someone other than just Father and Mummy. Although Harry had frightened her at times with the sheer intensity of his feelings and actions, she knew she trusted him, like she trusted Father, because she loved him. For some reason, every time she looked at him, she saw an image of Father superimposed.

Luna kissed him on the cheek, "I trust you, My Lord, with my honour, my virtue, my life, and my heart."

He smiled a warm smile and gently squeezed her shoulder before looking across the table.



His eyes met Lavender's.

She looked at him. Into his eyes. They seemed to glow with an intensity she'd never noticed in a boy before. She felt as if she could fall into those twin green orbs and lose herself forever.

Even when growing up with two younger brothers, Lavender had never really been the centre of attention. Her parents loved her but never spent the attention on her which they spent on Simon, her younger brother. Her relationship with Harland, her youngest brother, was the closest she'd ever been with anyone before, but he was only two when she'd left for Hogwarts last September and when she had come home, while it was clear he somewhat missed her, the attention span of a three-year-old moved quickly away from an older sister to whatever the brightest toy was in the moment.

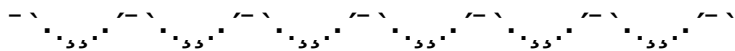
She truly had missed Grand-papa, who, whenever he visited, would take special care to spend time with his her and make her feel like she was the only one who mattered. He would tell her stories of how he and Grand-mama had met when their grandfathers had signed the betrothal contract and, how at first, they had not really seemed to have much in common, but through the first two years of marriage had come to realise his wife complemented him well and one day he realised just how much he had come to love her.

She hadn't understood, until her mother explained it just the summer before Hogwarts, the reason that nine months later her father had been born.

She knew Grand-papa was head of House Brown, and he had specifically instructed her to obey Harry as if he was her head of House. She had been educated, before going to Hogwarts, in the proper etiquette of the noble families, of which Brown was one.

The question caused her to remember the promise she had made to Parvati, Padma, and Smita, the twins' cousin; the promise to keep her virtue intact until married.

She absently fingered the embroidery on the cloak Harry had given her. Even the threads of the stitching seemed to buzz with a comforting song of friendship and protection. She opened her eyes and looked up at him, smiled and demurely looked down, fluttering her eyelashes. "I trust you, My Lord, with my honour, my virtue, my life, and my heart," she said, realising Luna, using the formal words, had raised the level of this question.



Harry smiled and then looked at Parvati.

Parvati had watched her twin and wondered what had come over her sister to want to kiss Harry so badly. Something had happened over the course of the last two days which caused Padma to either want to break, or forget, a promise she had made over the summer.

Parvati had a flash of their older cousin, Smita, walking in on the twins and Lavender practising their kissing. Smita had closed the door behind her, cast a locking charm on it and explained they needed a teacher. Over the following six weeks, Smita, using

Lavender as a teaching aid, had taught the girls more about kissing and intimacy than their mother had ever intended to teach them.

Smita had made them promise to never allow a boy to kiss them the way she had been kissing Lavender until their wedding night. Smita did insist it was perfectly acceptable to receive and give pleasure to other women to quench any driving desire.

All three of the girls had made solemn, but not magical, promises to do as Smita had asked.

Parvati just knew Padma had been about to kiss Harry. Both she and Lavender had overheard many boys talking about how pretty she and Padma were, and, as Smita had explained, how they would be treated as little more than toys.

And yet Harry had treated Padma and, she admitted to herself, all four of them like princesses. He had listened to them, asked for their opinions, and trusted them.

Another bit of information that weighed heavily on her decision was that Papa trusted this boy. Papa who had threatened the heads of several powerful merchant clans with sterility or worse if they dropped by for business again with their eldest sons, who seemed more interested in mentally undressing his daughters than treating them respectfully.

Even if Papa had signed a betrothal agreement for one or both of them, he would not simply have let the boy on the other end of it take possession of his daughters for fear that boy would want to 'test the goods', as she had overheard one of the older Ravenclaws say one day whilst staring at Padma.

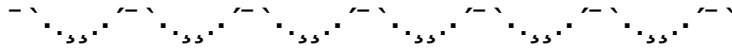
Really, there was only one path.

Harry was fascinated watching the Gryffindor twin. Parvati had met his eyes then stared off into the distance for a few moments. This was a side of Parvati he had never seen before; she seemed to be quiet and contemplative. Suddenly she looked up at him with something else he'd never seen from her before - intensity. Just as suddenly, her face softened and her voice quietly and shyly carried across the table as she looked down, a smile playing across her lips.



"I trust you, My Lord, with my honour, my virtue, my life, and my heart," she promised.

Finally, Harry turned to the witch around whose shoulders his arm was wrapped and gave her a gentle squeeze. She turned to him just as a tear rolled down her cheek.



Padma knew she was being silly. It was just that, for the first time in her life, she had the interest of a boy who didn't look at her like something slightly more useful than a piece of meat.

Both she and Parvati had realised they were developing earlier than their peers before they had started Hogwarts. Several of their friends had older brothers who had leered at them and, occasionally, had made advances at them.

Over the summer, when Smita had been teaching them about kissing and other forms of sensuality, she had watched Smita caress and kiss Lavender's body in places she thought of as secret, and yet had wondered what it felt like to have a boy touch her in those same places. What it would be like to have a boy take her and pleasure her.

And a few moments ago, she had been overcome by a desire to have this boy kiss her. Touch her. Pleasure her. Even if it meant breaking her promise to Smita. Although, with Papa giving her guardianship, even temporarily, over to this boy, it meant he had Papa's trust that she would do what was proper. Perhaps Papa wanted Harry in the family.

Papa was at the very top echelons of the Brahmin order. Although he was also an exceptionally successful merchant, Papa and Mama were Brahmin with over five thousand years of unbroken Brahmin lineage and heritage.

She looked at Parvati, who met her gaze and nodded. Padma noticed Parvati was fingering the embroidered coat of arms over her heart with her index finger while her thumb and middle finger formed a ring, communicating to Padma that Parvati felt there was only one choice.

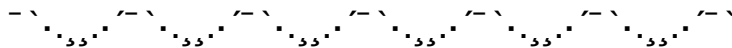
She turned once more to Harry, whose intense green eyes were looking at her unwaveringly. His eyes, if they were windows onto his soul, were filled with a love and passion that was overwhelming.

She knew he was in love with Hermione. It was clear from the moment she had walked into the Infirmary with him. She wanted so much for him to think of her that way too.

She knew there was really no other answer.

She spoke softly, but her voice was clear, "I, Padma Anuradha Patil, trust you, Harry James Potter, My Lord, with my honour, my virtue, my life and my heart, from this day forward until the end of my days."

The blood rushing through her body was hammering in her ears as she closed her eyes and melted into his side, so she missed the shocked intake of breath from Lavender and Parvati, the self-satisfied smile on Luna's lips, and the momentary look of surprise on Harry's face.



A~~~~~N

I do not recall if I first saw this in a private missive or in a review, but I want to explain about the detail I go into within this and other stories.

There are at least five people who feel I put too many details into the story. My complaint about much of fan fiction is the lack of details provided, in which I, the reader, am expected to make these herculean leaps of logic from scene to scene and at times, within the same scene. I enjoy details. I would happily read the collected and annotated works of Umberto Eco the moment I have 2 years of uninterrupted time.

I do feel, at times, a bit like James Joyce when I consider the length of the stories I write. "Ulysses" was 265,000 words. This story is likely going to surpass that by chapter 30.

So let me just say, here and now. If I am writing in too much detail for you, learn to skim.

I am writing this for my own enjoyment and the enjoyment of the beautiful woman whose head is resting in my lap as she slumbers and for my husband. A few of the girls in the village help me as well and they seem to enjoy my quagmire of little details.

If you're still reading after this, I hope you continue to enjoy the story.

This is a relatively short chapter – only 6100 words - but the next chapter is already written and in final review, so should be posted in 6 days or less.

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Chapter 7 – Keeping Friends Close And Enemies Closer

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Luna kissed Harry on the cheek, daintily picked up her fork and began eating. His arm was still around her shoulders and it felt

wonderful. Realising his other arm was around Padma's shoulders, her next forkful of food went towards Harry's mouth.

He looked at the forkful of food, then looked at Luna, then allowed her to put it in his mouth.

Padma, too, felt amazingly comfortable with his arm around her and, seeing what Luna was doing, joined in feeding him. Lavender and Parvati were watching as well, and decided they would be putting together a schedule of who got to sit next to Harry during each meal. If they had their way, Harry would never need to feed himself again.

Other than some sniggering from the others sitting at the table, the remainder of dinner was mostly uneventful.

Harry finished his meal quickly, as he had other business before dinner ended. "Ladies, I will be back in a few minutes. I need to talk to some of the others present about some favours I need from them," he explained, untangling his arms from around Luna's and Padma's shoulders. "I don't know how many I can save, but I have to keep my promise to Luna. I have to save as many of them as I can," he thought.

Luna scooted away from him slightly to give him room to get up, but squeezed his hand. "Let us know if you need any help, Harry. We are not completely helpless, you know," she assured him.

Padma, too, squeezed his hand, "What business do you have, or is that another thing you want to discuss later?" she asked curiously.

Harry sat back down for a moment. "I had just planned on speaking with people I know who are friends of those who are petrified and ask that they visit their friends in the Infirmary," he explained.

"Well then, we're going with you," Lavender said. Harry looked over at her in open curiosity.

"With everything going on about you being the heir of Slytherin, and all of the Boy-Who-Lived lies in circulation, and what just happened this evening with Ron, you walking over to the Slytherin table or the Hufflepuff table by yourself could lead to curses flying," Lavender explained.

Parvati picked up the thread easily, "And with us escorting you, you would effectively be declaring parley just by having females under your protection with you. You're openly declaring you want no conflict."

"And we do want to help you, Harry, especially after what you've done for us," Padma said.

"And what you've done for me," Luna added.

Harry knew he was getting hit from all sides, but he could not fault their logic or their arguments. "Very well, Ladies. Are you all done with your dinners?" he asked.

By way of answering, they all wiped their mouths and stood, donning their cloaks and fastening them. Lavender and Parvati walked around the end of the table and formed up on Harry.

He decided he would do the most difficult one first. "Slytherin first, I think, then Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and finally Gryffindor. Does that seem reasonable?" he asked quietly.

"That seems like the perfect order, actually," Luna explained, "as Slytherin see themselves as one of the two most-powerful houses. It would be a good idea to approach Malfoy as a recognised leader in your year group within Slytherin."

Harry looked amongst the girls and noted they were all nodding at this point. "Off to Slytherin then," he said.

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As Harry and his entourage began walking towards the Slytherin table, noise in the Great Hall quieted to just a few speculative conversations about what Harry was doing. He approached Draco, who raised an eyebrow, but otherwise remained silent.

Harry offered his right hand, palm up and fingers splayed, to Draco as he spoke, "Well met, Draco Malfoy. I am Harry James Potter, Lord of House Potter, and I wish to speak with you and some of the members of your house about a matter of mutual interest. I ask for parley," Harry said.

Normally parley was only sought from one Lord to another in times of conflict or when communication had broken down between two houses. By Harry formally introducing himself as if Draco did not yet know him, Harry was formally broadcasting to everyone within hearing range that Harry's prior announcement of forgiveness was an honest one and that, asking Draco for parley, it communicated to everyone present that Harry felt Draco was his equal.

This was truly a surprising turn of events for the purebloods present.

Based on all of the other actions Harry had taken since his spectacular crash into the Quidditch pitch, declaring Draco his equal was not a mistake on Harry's part. Draco knew Harry wanted everyone to know he thought Draco was his equal.

Draco was more than shocked. He had been prepared to have Harry insult or, at the very least, make demands. Parley was not even on the list of things he had expected.

While Draco never had any intentions of being obsequious to Harry, this was a situation for which there were no rules. He decided he would make an attempt to recover from his blunder from first year and follow his father's instructions concerning any opportunity to make friends with Potter.

This was clearly not some ploy on Potter's part to attack him, as there were, he had to admit, four pureblood princesses, regardless of what he may have called them publicly in the past, standing behind Potter.

"Lord Potter, you do the House of Malfoy and Slytherin House proud by asking for parley. With the permission of the elders of Slytherin House," he said while he looked around and noted every single one of the representatives of noble houses were nodding, "I would like to extend parley to you and the open hand of friendship," he finished, extending his hand and grasping Harry's wrist, as Harry grasped his.

"Well met, Draco Malfoy. And please, call me Harry," Harry said.

"And please call me Draco," Draco said, then gestured to the people sitting around him, who were all openly staring at Harry and his companions, "this is Vincent Crabbe, Gregory Goyle, Pansy

Parkinson, Tracey Davis, Millicent Bulstrode, and Blaise Zabini." As each one was introduced, they nodded their heads.

"A pleasure to meet you all. This is Padma Patil, her twin sister Parvati Patil, Lavender Brown, and Luna Lovegood. All, as you can see, are under the protection of House Potter," Harry said.

"Do we need privacy for the discussion you wish to have, Harry?" Draco asked.

"That won't be necessary, Draco. What I wanted to discuss is something you may consider a bit odd," Harry began. Once more, Draco's eyebrow raised, but no other sign of concern showed themselves.

"I believe the students who have been petrified are somewhat aware of their surroundings, if not fully aware," Harry said, noting Blaise seemed interested, Draco, Gregory, and Vincent appeared dismissive, and Pansy, Tracey, and Millicent seemed horrified, before schooling their features.

"I would like to ask those who are friends of Miss Greengrass to visit with her and talk to her or read to her while she is convalescing. Were I laying in the Infirmary and aware but unable to move, I would hope my friends would come visit with me, even if it is only for a few minutes a day to break up the monotony and the boredom. I think I would go quite mad if I didn't have someone, anyone, to listen to," Harry explained.

Harry waited a few moments for a response. Almost a full minute later, Draco broke the silence. "Merlin's beard, Man! You're serious!" he exclaimed.

Harry nodded, "I am. I have read accounts from others who have been petrified and they indicated they were aware during the entire time until the petrification was lifted," he explained.

Draco looked at the Pansy, who had paled at this information. He looked back to Harry, pulled his wand and pointed it at himself.

"Lord Potter," he began, but saw the expression on Harry's face as he focused on Draco, "that is, Harry,, you have my word at least one member of Slytherin House who is a friend of Miss Greengrass,

shall visit with her at least daily. Should any of the other affected students not have friends willing to come visit them, someone from Slytherin House shall befriend them," Draco said. This brought a smile to Harry's face. Draco waited for Harry's response. Once more, he was surprised.

"Draco, I am pleased to hear you say that, and I will trust you at your word. That is how lasting friendships start," Harry said, once more extending his hand to Draco.

Pansy could easily tell Draco was flummoxed at Harry's gesture. He was moving slowly, trying to assimilate how a Gryffindor was acting friendly towards a Slytherin, not to mention treating him as an equal when, according to the rules of the interaction between ancient houses and merely noble houses that the Lord of an ancient house rode high and above the Lord of a noble house, and Draco was still and again only the heir.

Draco once more took Harry's wrist in his hand, "Thank you, Harry," Draco said.

Draco noted that, instead of quickly releasing his grip, Harry kept hold of Draco's wrist.

"Draco, I need to extract another promise from you," Harry said quietly, his tone serious.

"Oh Dung! Here it comes. The unfulfillable promise," Draco thought. "Yes?" he said, swallowing nervously.

Relinquishing Draco's wrist, he explained. "I am not requiring a magical oath," Harry said, feeling Draco release the slight tension he had added to the handshake. "But I want you, Blaise, Vincent, Gregory, and the other gentlemen of Slytherin to promise me that you will not allow Pansy, Tracey, Millicent, or any of the other Ladies of Slytherin House, to be left alone with Professor Lockhart. Not for detention, not for extra credit work, for no reason whatsoever. Your word is good enough for me," Harry said, surveying all of the boys, but looking at Draco intensely.

All of those within hearing range looked up momentarily towards the head table before looking back at Harry. Each one of the boys swore their promise.

"Thank you. One and all. If he should try to get one or more of the girls in detention, please find me and tell me. One way or another, I shall prevent it from coming to pass," Harry said, nodding at them all.

"Enjoy the rest of your meal," Harry said, looking about the table and nodding, "and thank you for listening to me."

"Thank you, Harry, for letting us know and giving us an opportunity to take care of our own," Draco said. All of the second year Slytherins nodded at this, with Pansy and Tracey smiling at Harry as he met their gaze.

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Harry turned, "Ladies? Shall we depart?" he asked.

Upon receiving four nods, the five of them took a short walk to the Hufflepuff table.

While the students sitting at the Slytherin table had demonstrated curiosity at his approach, the Hufflepuffs seemed to have a mixture of either fear or pure hatred. His approach, however, was to a small, specifically-targeted group of second years.

Hannah, Susan, Ernie, and Cedric, a boy Harry promised himself would not be dying in a graveyard this time around, watched the five approach with some trepidation. They, like most everyone in the Great Hall, had watched the group approach the Slytherin table and had watched as Harry had spoken in a seemingly friendly manner with quite possibly one of the most antagonistic Slytherin in the school. Everyone had been expecting spellfire of the worst sort, but instead watched two rivals acting like boyhood friends.

And now, it seemed, Harry Potter was focusing on the four of them as he approached.

"My wand is in my hand if he makes a wrong move," Susan whispered to Hannah. Hannah nodded, and her wand was also now held ready in her hand, in the event hostilities began.

Harry approached and bowed his head slightly at the quartet, showing his palms up and open, demonstrating he had no wand at

the ready. "Miss Abbot, Miss Bones, Mr. Diggory, Mr. MacMillan. I would like to ask a favour of you," Harry began, then explained his belief about the petrified students and asked that they visit with Justin.

He spoke in a normal conversational tone, allowing other Hufflepuffs to overhear the explanation. One of the older Hufflepuffs interrupted his explanation. "You mean they know everything that is going on around them like some people in comas?" the fifth year muggleborn Hufflepuff asked.

Harry turned to the girl, who started in fear as those green eyes came to bear on her. His genuine smile nearly melted her heart. "That is exactly what I am saying, Miss?" he asked.

"Karla Sewell," she said, blushing.

"Yes, Miss Sewell, that is it exactly. I believe they, at the very least, hear everything that is happening to them. I was hoping their friends would be willing to talk to them, read to them, and possibly discuss their school assignments with them," Harry explained.

"May I call you Harry, Lord Potter?" Susan asked. Harry nodded.

"And please call me Susan. With what happened between you and Justin, why are you wanting him looked after?" she asked suspiciously.

Harry nodded at the question. "Tell me, Susan. If someone accused you of something you knew was patently wrong, and you believed they made that accusation without having all of the information, and you were unable to, at the time, provide them with all of the information, and then something happened to that person and you had the power to aid that person, would you do it?" he asked.

"Well of course I would," Susan answered indignantly.

"And yet you think I should react differently to the same situation?" Harry asked.

"But the snake in the duelling club?" Hannah asked.

"I was telling the snake to not attack Justin. Which is the reason that, instead of striking him and envenoming him with venom not even magic could prevent from killing him, the snake lowered itself and began turning towards me," Harry explained.

"Harry, I am not saying I don't believe you," Ernie said, picking up the conversation, "but how can we know you're telling the truth. About the snake, I mean?" he asked.

"A fair question. May I call you Ernie?" Harry asked. Ernie nodded. "Ernie, what do you know about magical oaths?"

"Only what I have read in 'Hogwarts: A History'. A person with magic can swear an oath on their life or their magic or both to prove the truth or to... Oh!" Ernie exclaimed in realisation.

"Well, now the entire school is going to know it," he thought. Harry slowly drew his wand, pointed it at his own throat and cast *Sonorus* on himself. He then held his wand high as he spoke, "As my honour has been questioned by several present here tonight, but due to a lack of information, not due to a breach of reason, and not out of antagonism, I am swearing out a statement of truth and fact."

The nervous tittering running about the hall quieted. Not another sound could be heard.

Harry swore out his statement, "I, Harry James Potter, Lord of the House of Potter," he began. There were a number of loud gasps at this from the Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor table, and a loud shout of protest from one particular person at the Gryffindor table. Harry ignored them all and continued, "do swear upon my life and my magic that I instructed a snake to turn away from Justin Finch-Fletchley and further instructed the snake to not bite any students and to instead calm itself and turn towards me. Thus do I swear!"

An intense cyan field of magic washed over Harry, causing the air to crackle and the floor of the Great Hall to thrum with the level of power washing over it. Ernie, Hannah, and Susan had to shield their eyes, the field was so bright.

Once the field dissipated, Harry cast, "Lumos." The tip of his wand glowed brightly for a few moments. He then whispered, "Nox," and

the radiance dimmed before winking out. He then pointed his wand at his throat again and cancelled the Sonorus.

"I hope that now, you can at least believe me about that incident, Ernie," Harry said.

The four 'puffs looked between one another then looked at Harry. "We'll make sure Justin doesn't go starkers, Harry," Cedric said, "and we'll try to visit with everyone else as well."

"Thank you," Harry said, then knelt down to discuss something more quietly with the four.

"Susan, I am doing this because I need you to trust me on another matter. Please hold this for the remaining duration of what I need to discuss with you. Perhaps this gesture will allow you to at least not believe you need to hold your wand on me while I am talking to you," Harry said with a slight smile as he held his wand out to her, handle first.

She took it in her left hand and flipped her robe off of her right, showing that she had, in fact, had a wand trained on him the entire time. His smile got bigger. "Excellent work, Miss Bones," he said with a smile, getting an embarrassed smile from Susan in return, before his expression changed to one of utter seriousness.

"If I have an opportunity in the next week to speak with your aunt, I will be taking that opportunity," he explained, then looked up at the two boys. "Cedric, Ernie, I am charging you with the responsibility of the safety of these two girls. They are, without fail, never to be left alone in the presence of Professor Lockhart. Should he assign either or both a detention, the four of you will immediately seek me out and I shall deal with the miscreant. Do you accept this responsibility, Mr. Diggory? Mr. MacMillan?" Harry asked, his tone deadly serious.

Hannah and Susan looked at Harry in dismay. Cedric and Ernie realised Harry was not at all joking about accepting the responsibility. "I do, Lord Potter," both boys responded in unison.

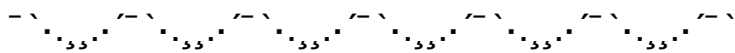
"It isn't just Susan and Hannah I am concerned with, Gentlemen, and Ladies, I am not dismissing you out of hand with protecting other girls. I would ask you let the other years and everyone in your year know and to ensure I am informed should he attempt to assign

a detention to a girl. I will prevent him from being alone with female students, one way or another," he said adamantly.

Susan put her wand away and returned Harry's wand to him, handle first. She then leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. "I will send Aunt Amelia an owl tonight before curfew. Would you like to meet with her somewhere particular?" Susan asked.

"I think it best that she speak to the concierge at Gringott's to coordinate a meeting with me. If she can be at the London branch tomorrow after half twelve, that would be best," Harry whispered quietly as he put his wand away.

She nodded. Harry stood back up. "Thank you again. I look forward to speaking with you later," he said conversationally, then turned to the four girls.



"Ravenclaw next?" he asked. Luna and Padma both nodded, a slight display of fear in both of their eyes. "No need to worry, My Loves, no harm shall come to you in my presence," he assured them, trying to comfort them. This caused the two girls to smile, but Padma's still had a component of fear to it.

Harry approached Roger Davies, Cho Chang, and Morag MacDougall. All three of them watched the group's approach with open curiosity. Harry noted, with pleasure, that no one seemed openly hostile. Even Beatrice Randle, the girl who just this morning had been responsible for causing the severe bullying of Luna, was showing fear and embarrassment instead of anger or hate.

"Mr. Davies, Miss MacDougal, Miss Chang," Harry said, bowing his head to each one.

Cho, whose father was a wealthy merchant and well-respected in China, but treated only slightly better than muggleborns by the purebloods of magical Britain, had been taught etiquette well, as her grandmother had drilled it into her from the age of three.

Morag and Cho stood and curtsied, surprising both Harry and the girls. Harry took Morag's hand first and kissed it, then took Cho's

hand and kissed it. "Ladies," he said formally, "please be seated and get comfortable. I do not stand on formality for a friendly conversation," setting the tone for what he was about to say.

Morag and Cho looked at one another then looked at Harry again.

Harry explained his position on the petrified students and asked that they visit with Penelope. He also warned both Roger about Lockhart and asked that he ensure Morag and Cho remained safe and requested they pass that information on to the remainder of Ravenclaw house. He noticed Cho had a horrified look on her face.

"What is it, Miss Chang?" Harry asked in concern.

"Beatrice. She and Hillary have had detentions with him twice this month alone," Cho said, looking ill. Harry looked over at Randle, not intending to project the anger he was feeling, but Randle immediately began crying as he stared at her. His gaze softened, as he realised she thought he was angry with her.

"Thank you for telling me this, Miss Chang. I will ensure they are unharmed, and if they have been harmed, I will personally ensure they are healed," Harry said, looking down at the beautiful Chinese witch.

"If you will excuse me, I need to apologise to someone," he said. He then turned to Luna and Padma, who looked at Harry.

"We need to make sure they are cared for, Harry," Luna said. Padma just nodded, a hard expression on her face, but clearly not directed at either Harry or Beatrice.

"That's my girls," Harry said with a smile. He walked over to where Beatrice was sitting and knelt down to the crying witch. He noticed Professor Flitwick was already on his way.

"Miss Randle, my apologies a few moments ago. I am not angry with you," Harry said in a soft voice. He put his hand on her back and began rubbing soft circles. Her sobbing intensified. "Beatrice, please tell me what's wrong," Harry pleaded. She turned and buried her head into his shoulder, sobbing incoherently.

The girl sitting next to Randle scooted over and offered Harry her seat. Harry sat down and pulled the distraught girl onto his lap. Harry looked at the girl whose seat he had taken, "Thank you, Miss. Does she have a nickname her friends call her?"

"Bea, Lord Potter," the girl answered.

"Bea," he cooed to her, "Shush now. I am not upset with you," Harry said.

Professor Flitwick had arrived and had heard what Harry had told the girl. "Lord Potter, I think you should know that Miss Randle came to me before lunch today and confessed her transgressions against both Miss Lovegood and Miss Patil, as well as two other Ravenclaw first years. She, and the other five girls are being appropriately punished. The two who were prefects are no longer, and all six girls are on academic probation through the end of next year," Flitwick explained.

"Professor Flitwick, could you please send for Madam Pomfrey, as well as identify the student whose name is Hillary?" Harry asked.

The girl who had vacated her seat began crying before answering softly, "I'm Hillary Jacobsen, My Lord. I'm sorry for what we did to Miss Lovegood," she managed to get out before she, too, began sobbing incoherently.

Harry extricated his right arm from Randle and wrapped it around Jacobsen. "I think it is critical we get these two girls to the Infirmary, Professor, and into the care of Madam Pomfrey," Harry said. He thought for a moment and said, "I think asking Professor Snape to the Infirmary would be appropriate as well."

Flitwick called two house elves and asked them to take the girls to the Infirmary. He then looked up at the head table and made eye contact with Madam Pomfrey, who wiped her mouth and left out the staff entrance, heading to her domain. Flitwick then made eye contact with Snape, who, for a moment, looked surprised, then nodded slightly before also leaving out the staff entrance.

Flitwick was about to rush off to the Infirmary himself before stopping and looking back at Harry, who had stood up from the bench and placed a hand on the professor's shoulder. Harry leaned

down and whispered into the professor's ear for some moments before getting a look of incredulity from him. Harry just nodded solemnly.

Flitwick practically ran to the Infirmary with a look of furious rage on his face, knowing that if he looked at the head table, he likely would be casting before thinking.

Harry had a grim expression on his face as he walked away from the Ravenclaw table. With the exception of Roger, Cho, and Marog, all of the Ravenclaws were looking at Harry with fear in their eyes.

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Harry's mood had darkened as he approached the Gryffindor table. Ron was about to yell out an insult at Harry; an insult that died in his throat when he looked at Harry's face. It was no wonder the Ravenclaws had looked at Harry in fear. His eyes actually glowed with the intensity of the anger he was feeling. He had no physical proof yet. The only information he had was from the mind healers at Saint Mungo's, who had told him what they had uncovered from their attempts to reverse the self-inflicted spell damage Lockhart had suffered.

He approached Percy and sat down heavily next to him. He had a brief, whispered conversation with Percy, including that he knew how the Gryffindor prefect felt about Penelope and then asked that he talk to her about his feelings while she was petrified. He explained that if she wasn't aware of what he said, then it would be good practice for him for when she did recover, and if she was aware, at least he wouldn't get immediately shut down by her telling him she didn't feel that way about him. He explained it would be a good way for her to get to know him and that, if Percy were completely honest with her while she was convalescing, it would plant the seeds for, at the very least, a life-long friendship, if not more.

Harry then told Percy about Lockhart and asked that he and the twins lookout for Ginny and to warn the other members of the house about it as he would only rarely be returning to the Gryffindor tower.

Percy looked at Harry, then looked at the four girls; each seemed to be looking at Harry with significant concern. "Thank you, Harry. I

shall do as you ask with regard to Penelope. Everyone in Gryffindor will know about the other matter by after dinner, morning at the latest. All of the prefects shall know about it tonight."

Harry stood. He felt the weight of the world on his shoulders, and a deep anger smouldered within him.

"Harry," Luna said. Harry looked up at her sharply, noting the concern in her voice.

"Dinner is just about over. Perhaps we should talk with the Deputy Headmistress about our quarters?" she asked. Luna could feel the anger which radiated from Harry, and knew that, if he looked up at the head table and saw the target of his anger, the man would not survive the night. She had, for a moment, a flash of Harry drawing his wand and incinerating Lockhart where he sat, leaving only a smoking pair of boots at the head table. She had grasped Padma's wrist in fear. She whispered to Padma that they had to keep Harry distracted or all would be for nothing.

When Harry grunted non-committally to Luna's comment about their quarters, Padma leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. When he looked at her, Luna took the opportunity to kiss him on the cheek. Lavender and Parvati then did the same. They didn't have any idea why Padma had kissed Harry, but refused to be left out of the opportunity to get in their own kisses.

Luna could feel his anger bleeding off as a somewhat embarrassed grin graced his face.

"And what was that for?" he asked.

"Just for taking such good care of us, Harry," Padma said.

"Not to mention I like kissing you, Harry," Lavender said with a blush.

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A few moments later. the food and plates disappeared, the professors and the prefects escorted the houses to their dorms. McGonagall approached Harry and the girls.

"Lord Potter, your quarters are ready. If you would follow me, I shall escort you to them," she said stiffly.

Harry stood and helped the girls stand and ensured they were ready to go. They followed McGonagall out of the Great Hall. Once Harry was certain they were by themselves, he addressed his favourite professor.

"Deputy Headmistress McGonagall, please do not be upset with the girls over the change in accommodations. And believe me when I say I have very good reasons for having the girls together under my protection. I know it may seem unconventional, but I assure you I have their best interests in mind," he explained respectfully.

Minerva stopped and looked back at him. She stood there tensely, it seemed ready to explode. She closed her eyes a moment, took a deep breath, paused then released it. This exercise seemed to take ten years off her age as her face and shoulders relaxed.

"My apologies, Lord Potter. It is not my place to judge. I suppose I am somewhat offended you don't believe the staff can keep these young ladies safe," she said calmly.

Harry looked at her sadly. "Deputy Headmistress, students lay in the Infirmary, petrified, because the staff could not protect them. Last year, the dark lord was in this very castle and attacked me not once, not twice, but three times. One of those times was when you sent four first-year students into the Forbidden Forest at night for a detention," Harry explained.

"Hagrid took you into the Forbidden Forest?!" she exclaimed in horror, her hand covering her mouth in shock. "He told me he needed some students to look for something," she said in a gasp.

"And the Headmaster did not tell you of the events in the forest? Where a member of your house and a member of Slytherin house were attacked by the dark lord, only to have him driven off by a centaur?" Harry asked casually.

"He did not," a still-off-balance McGonagall responded.

"I didn't think he had. Had he told you, I expect you likely would have torn his beard out one hair at a time," Harry said with a genuine smile.

McGonagall, too, smiled for a moment, before becoming serious once more. "I should get you all to your quarters. It is late," she said and began walking again.

After being led through a series of corridors, they arrived at a set of double doors. It was clear to McGonagall that the elves had taken their instructions a bit too literally when asked to prepare the quarters for Lord Potter, as the Potter family crest was on the doors.

"Each one of you will need to be keyed into the wards. All of the professors are keyed into these quarters in the event there is an emergency," she explained.

Harry brought up an immediate issue with this arrangement. "Deputy Headmistress, there are two professors I will need immediately removed from having the ability to enter our quarters," he said, his voice letting McGonagall know he would not accept any arguments.

"Lord Potter, I know that you and Professor Snape are not on the best of terms..." she began, but he held up his hand to stop her.

"Actually, Deputy Headmistress, Potions Master Snape is not one of the two professors I wish removed from having access," he paused for a moment at the look of surprise on her face. "No, the two professors for which I have no trust whatsoever are Professor Trelawney and Professor Lockhart. In point of fact, I will not permit any of those under my care to be alone with Professor Lockhart."

"Surely you're not suggesting..." McGonagall began, but was once more cut off by Harry.

"I am not suggesting anything. I am outright accusing him of forcibly having inappropriate relations with female students he has had in detentions. When I was in my detention with him, he all but bragged about his prowess with obliviation spells and how fond he was of young girls. No, Deputy Headmistress, if I see Professor Lockhart in my quarters or, in fact, anywhere near my charges, he and I shall have an honour duel, and I won't be the one losing," Harry said, a grim expression on his face. "It is the very reason that two

Ravenclaw witches are being examined by Potions Master Snape and Madam Pomfrey. Their safety is being overseen by Professor Flitwick and Groundskeeper Hagrid."

"That is a serious allegation, Lord Potter," McGonagall said.

"One you should be contacting Director Amelia Bones of the DMLE over, Deputy Headmistress," Harry said.

"I shall take that under advisement," McGonagall said, thinking she would have to consult with Albus, even though he was no longer technically in charge.

She showed them how to key themselves into the door, in that it required Harry to authorise anyone new. She bid them goodnight and left.

Harry shooed the girls in ahead of him and closed the door, intentionally ignoring the disillusioned person he recognised standing in the shadows.

Once the door was closed, Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped from the shadows and cast a collapsing ward in front of the door.

There were two things Kingsley was certain of at that moment. First was that if anyone tried entering Lord Potter's quarters tonight, he and Tonks would be there to convince them otherwise. Second was that he needed to talk to Amelia about the Lockhart fellow. Her niece was going to school here, and Merlin help anyone hurting her Susan.

Kingsley recast the disillusionment and waited in the shadows once more.

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I revised something in the prior chapter which had bothered me. It is unlikely for Draco to swear out an oath to Harry, especially when he did not have control over the factors involved in keeping the oath.

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I welcome reviews.

I do not demand them, nor will any that are posted significantly alter the direction or posting schedule of this or any of my other stories. I can appreciate the reviews which say nothing more than "update soon", as those indicate to me you enjoy the story and want me to update it in a timely fashion, but with the same quality to detail and writing as I have written previously. I understand you're not trying to rush me, but you are anticipating reading the next chapter. Thank you for those reviews.

For those of you with more time, more insight, higher level of articulation, thank you for the constructive, though not always positive, feedback and criticism. I appreciate the time you took to write the review, and I do try to respond to each and every one of these personally. I do try to take to heart all of the critical comments concerning the stories I write.

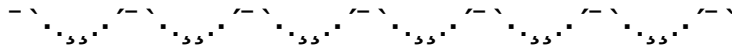
Personally, I generally send comments regarding spelling and word usage in a PM, because after the author corrects those issues, they are no longer appropriate to remain with the story. That is my personal quirk, and your position may be different.

However, if you wish to be disrespectful, realise the only thing you are achieving by being disrespectful in a review is placing your uncouth attitude in a public place wherein everyone who comes across it can not only see your lack of tact, but it is also boorish behaviour and you will be marginalised.

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Chapter 8 – Alongside Night, Morning Breaks



A house elf wearing Hogwarts livery was waiting inside the entrance hall of the suite. Harry thought he recognised the elf, so called her name. "Mippy?" he asked.

The little elf looked surprised. "You is remembering Mippy?" she asked in surprise.

Harry smiled. "Yes, Mippy. I presume you are here to help us get situated?" he asked.

"Mippy is here to helps you move in and makes sure you is safe," she said, nodding.

"Can you please show us around, Mippy?" Harry asked politely.

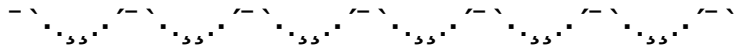
Mippy showed them around their new quarters. In all, there were fourteen single bedrooms with king-sized beds, four larger bedrooms with ultraking beds, one master suite which was twice the size of the Gryffindor common room, with a bed big enough to sleep twelve giants, a dining area where Harry presumed no cooking would ever likely be done, and a common room large enough to seat thirty people comfortably. All of the bedrooms were decorated uniquely.

Each of the single bedrooms had the bed, a dresser, a mirror, and a bathroom with a shower, a separate bath, and a toilet. The larger bedrooms had full, opulent baths large enough for six adults to soak comfortably. The master suite had a swimming-pool sized bath along with the usual accoutrements, including benches, a sauna big enough for eight people, with fainting couches and lounges scattered around the periphery.

The girls, even Luna, was a bit wide-eyed at the accommodations. They were pulled out of their gawking by Harry's voice.

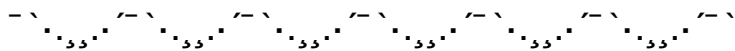
"Pick whichever bedroom suits you. Mippy will put your trunk and your belongings in your room and your name will be engraved on the door," Harry explained. "Why don't you get situated and we'll meet in the common room in thirty minutes?"

The girls just nodded absently as Harry disappeared into the master suite, intent on getting cleaned up before going out to the common room.

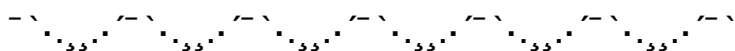


Harry disrobed and waded into the bath. He leaned back and floated in the warm water, trying to lose the feeling of impending doom that seemed to surround him. He knew he was going to, yet again, face a legendary creature in just two weeks. He wasn't sure what he was going to do to save the others, but he would do what he could to save them all. Hopefully Gringott's could help. His additional list for them was growing longer by the hour. He closed his eyes for a moment and tried to relax the growing tension between his shoulder blades. The warmth and the magic of the pool helped.

When Mippy came in twenty minutes later, he was asleep, the magic of the bath caused him to float on the surface. Using her house elf magic, she levitated him out of the pool, dried him off, dressed him in pyjamas and put him under the already-warmed bedding.



Luna looked at each of the individual rooms, then looked at one of the larger rooms. Although the single rooms were nice, she didn't really want to sleep alone. If she was honest with herself, and she always tried to be, she abhorred sleeping by herself. The last time she had been able to curl up in bed with someone was before her mother had died, and the thought of sleeping alone brought tears to her eyes. She really needed to cuddle with someone tonight. She decided she would ask the others if one of them would allow her to sleep with them in one of the larger bedrooms. Without Harry with her, her insecurities flooded back. She doubted they would want to talk with her, much less sleep in the same room with her, but the worst they could do was hit her and call her names, she thought as she experienced a flashback of Randle slamming her fist into her eye and falling to the ground while the others laughed and taunted her.



While Luna was off inspecting all of the bedrooms, Padma, Parvati, and Lavender had looked around and had decided they would leave

the single room closest to Harry for Hermione, they wanted Luna to have the next closest single room, and they would each pick one of the next three, though they doubted they would ever sleep in their single rooms.

Padma had told Lavender and Parvati that, while she had enjoyed the learning opportunities within Ravenclaw, the bullying and Luna's treatment far outweighed any benefit. She also confided she had truly missed sleeping with them and hoped they would allow her to join them again, as a tear escaped from her eyes.

Both Lavender and Parvati wrapped their arms around Padma and expressed they, too, had missed Padma, and only when Hermione wasn't in the dorm room could they sneak in cuddling with one another. While they had had plenty of opportunity the previous night to take advantage of their dorm room all to themselves, they did so but only to comfort one another as one of their own was now laying in the Infirmary with an unknown prognosis.

They were exiting the room closest to the master suite when Luna approached them. They could tell something was off with the youngest witch, but it was her tears and the timidity in her voice that had them all worried.

"I know we're not really friends," Luna began, causing the other three girls to look at one another and think simultaneously, "we're not?" before they looked back at her, "but I was just wondering, and I will understand if you don't want to, but would one of you be willing to sleep with me?" she stammered.

Padma took Luna's hand and pulled her into the room they had designated as Luna's room. Luna couldn't see where she was going as the tears blinded her, but she came to the conclusion they didn't want her with them.

Padma helped Luna to sit down on the bed then sat down next to Luna and pulled Luna's head down to her shoulder.

"Luna? Doesn't Harry call you 'Little Pixel'?" she asked gently.

Luna nodded, but continued crying.

"Can I call you that, too?" she asked.



Luna looked up at Padma, "Do you want to?"

Padma nodded, "I would like to call you that, if I may." Luna nodded, her tears still falling unabated.

"Little Pixel, you are too our friend, and so much more," Padma expressed earnestly. Padma knew that Luna had been alone before she started Hogwarts and that, coupled with the abuse she had experienced since September, had all but crushed any self-esteem, so was not surprised at her response.

"I know you're just saying that to make me feel better. I know I am just in the way or a freak," she said, Padma barely able to understand her words as the little blonde began sobbing.

Parvati sat down on the other side of Luna and Lavender sat down at Luna's feet, trying to surround her with their warmth and comfort.

"Little Pixel, that is simply not true. Do you really think I would risk an angry Harry Potter for someone I didn't care about?" Padma asked. "Do you think I would be sitting here now, letting you know just how much I care for you and..." she paused for a moment, thinking about how she really felt about the warm little witch sitting sandwiched between them. She had to admit to herself that she really did think of Luna as the little sister she and Parvati had never had but had always wanted. That she cared for Luna just as much as she cared for Lavender, and that was almost as much as she cared for Parvati.

"Little Pixel, do you think I would try to comfort you if I didn't love you?" she asked, kissing Luna on the forehead.

Luna was wallowing in fear and self-loathing, when she heard a word from Padma she had never heard her speak before. Padma had been the one person in Ravenclaw who had consistently looked after her when she had been abused by her house mates. Padma was the one who had to be told time and again not to go to the professors or it would only get worse. Padma had been the one source of care and stability.

"You... You love me?" Luna asked in a tiny voice, her tears slowing, "Why would you love me?"

"Luna," Padma began, pulling the little witch tighter, "you've always had a special place in my heart. Ever since this morning, though, that place has been growing bigger, bit by bit, until it burst open just now and allowed me to see what you mean to me. You're like the little sister I've never had. When you're happy, it makes me all the more happier. When you're sad or upset, all I can think about is making you feel better," she said, realising her words were more true than she knew before speaking them. She gently kissed Luna on the forehead again to give her time to collect herself.

Luna relaxed against her for a moment. She looked up at Padma again. Once more, in a timid voice, she asked, "Does that mean you would let me sleep with you? I won't take up too much space. I promise."

Padma knew that now was not the time to joke with the little witch. "Luna, Hermione's bedroom is the single right next to the master suite. Your bedroom is right next to hers. Then there's the bigger bedroom. After that, the next three singles are mine, Lavender's and Parvati's. We had planned on having our trunks put in our room but sleeping together in the bigger bedroom. Do you mind sleeping with all three of us?" she asked.

Luna looked down at Lavender, who had been rubbing her calves, and then she looked at Parvati on the other side, who had been, along with Padma, rubbing circles in her back, and then finally at Padma. "You would let me sleep with you?" she asked then looked at the other two girls again, "All of you?" before her eyes rested once again on Padma.

"Yes, Little Pixel. You have to sleep with us. You can't be the only one sleeping by yourself," Padma said, watching the smile of realisation bloom on Luna's face.

"Luna we should get your face washed," Lavender said. "We don't want Harry upset because you've been crying, now do we?" she asked.

"Oh my! Harry! No! We don't want him upset over me again!" she exclaimed in concern.

"Hush, Little Pixel. Harry wouldn't be upset at you. He loves you too, you know. I can't think of any reason our Harry would ever be upset

by our Pixel," Padma said with a smile. "Lavender, could you help Luna wash her face while we arrange everything with Mippy?"

Lavender stood and held her hands out to Luna, "Come on, Little Sister. Time to wash your face and get ready for bed. After we talk with Harry, we can go straight to bed."

Luna stood and let Lavender take her into the bathroom.

Padma and Parvati looked after them then walked out to the common room before Padma called to Mippy and explained the sleeping arrangements. Then Padma had one other request.

"Mippy, can you ask Madam Pomfrey for a dreamless sleep potion for Luna? She is a bit unsettled about all of the day's revelations and we want to make sure she is well-rested for classes tomorrow," Padma explained to the elf. Mippy snapped her fingers and popped out.

Less than a minute later, she popped back in with five vials. "Madam Pomfrey says there is one for each of you. If you have any problems sleeping to take one. She say you all had big days," Mippy explained, and set them on the table before popping out to arrange the bedrooms.

They each went to their respective bedrooms and got ready for bed. For Padma, this was knickers, a nightshirt, and a robe so she could be modest during their meeting. For Parvati, she decided it would be inappropriate to just wear her wool robe, as she normally slept with just added blankets. She changed knickers and put on a nightshirt and her wool robe.

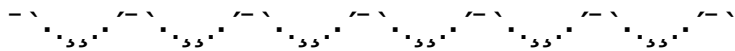
Lavender and Luna came out of Luna's bathroom and saw that Luna's trunk was at the foot of her bed. "I am going to get changed for bed. You should do so as well, and we can meet in the common room," Lavender explained.

"Thank you, again, Lavender," Luna gushed, then kissed the older girl on the cheek. Lavender gave her a hug in return and went to her own room to get changed.

Lavender, too, thought that she needed to wear more than just her robe and changed her knickers and put on a nightshirt and her wool robe.

Luna got ready for bed and put on her wool robe. The castle could be a bit drafty. To ensure she wouldn't be cold, she also wrapped the cloak Harry had given her around her shoulders.

When she entered the common room, Padma and Parvati were already waiting there, and they had left a space open between them, she presumed was for Lavender, so was quite surprised when they beckoned her over and made her to sit between them. Lavender entered and sat on the other side of Parvati. The three older girls spent a few moments reassuring Luna they did care about her and wouldn't let anyone hurt her. They then included her in their conversation regarding clothing, makeup and fashion.



When he didn't show up in the common room, the girls braved him yelling at them and knocked on his door. When he didn't answer, they entered and saw him asleep in his bed. Mippy popped in and just about caused them to scream.

"Master Harry fell asleep in the baths. Master Harry is very tired. Master Harry's Ladies should take their potions and join Master Harry in sleep," Mippy said before popping out. A moment later, she popped back in with four of the potion vials and handed one to each of the witches.

"Mippy and the other Hogwarts elves makes sure Master Harry and his Ladies be safe asleep tonight," Mippy said before pulling the door shut, casting a locking spell and popping out.

Padma tried opening the door, but it wouldn't even rattle. "I guess we just have to sleep here tonight," she said, a slightly conspiratorial grin in her face.

Padma walked over to the bed, uncorked the potion, drank it, took off her robe and snuggled in next to Harry. She then beckoned for the other girls.

Lavender sat down on the other side of the bed and patted the mattress next to her. "Come here, Little Pixel. You're sleeping between Harry and I tonight."

Luna shyly walked over, drank her potion and took her cloak and robe off, shocking the other three girls. Luna was wearing nothing beneath her robe. She quickly scooted over and cuddled right up against Harry.

Even Luna was surprised when, in his sleep, Harry rolled over and wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. This seemed to cause the sleeping boy to relax even more.

Lavender and Parvati gained their equilibrium again, drank their potions, removed their robes and spooned in, Lavender behind Luna and Parvati behind Padma.

"Lights off," Padma called out and the room was plunged into darkness, the girls succumbing to the potion-induced sleep.

Once the girls had fallen asleep, Mippy returned with a quiet pop, she snapped her fingers and all five of the sleeping children flashed pink for a moment. Mippy, satisfied they would not awaken due to personal elimination needs, popped out again.

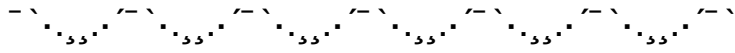
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Harry woke up slowly, surrounded by the pleasant sensations of warmth, the pressure of soft bodies wrapped around him and the scent of lavender. He felt his arms wrapped around one of them who was straddled on him. He ran his hands up her back then down to the edge of her knickers. Except she wasn't wearing knickers. Her warm little bum was soft and smooth. He opened his eyes in surprise.

In the darkness, he could not see who was on him, but he knew it was Luna. He had enough opportunities during their years at Hogwarts and the one time, when she had visited after Hermione's death, to know she still carried the scent of heather and lilacs everywhere she went. It was a scent he had come to associate with his love for her.

He didn't know how she had come to be sleeping on top of him, but it was something he thought he could surely get used to.

Since it was still dark, and he was still tired, he let sleep claim him again.



Padma awoke and was surprised to smell Parvati's hair and feel her sister in her arms. "Lights quarter" she mumbled tiredly. Sure enough, Parvati was curled up against her, the braid of her long hair running up and over the top of the pillow. Padma then realised she had another warm body behind her. She remembered she had gone to bed last night with Parvati, Lavender, and Luna. "Now why did Luna join us?" she wondered. Suddenly adrenaline surged through her body as the events of the previous day flooded back into her mind.

She realised a hand was resting on her bare stomach from behind her. She calmed at the realisation it was a soft, small hand. Since she was familiar with waking in the presence of one or both of Parvati and Lavender, she knew this must be Luna. But the warm body behind her was larger than Lavender. Her question of how this could be was answered by the voice she dreamed about hearing whilst laying snuggled in bed.

"Padma, by chance are you awake?" Harry whispered softly.

"Good morning, Harry," she replied. "Did you sleep well?" she asked, slightly above a whisper.

"I don't know about sleeping well, but I have to admit this is one of the best awakenings I have ever had," he whispered back, laughing slightly.

"We didn't really intend to sleep in your bed with you, Harry, but Mippy locked us in here," Padma explained quietly.

"Can you extricate yourself enough to help me slide Luna off of me? She is still asleep and using me as a mattress and considering her state of undress, I am afraid to touch her without her waking and thinking I was taking undue liberties," Harry explained.

Harry had awoken and quickly discovered he still had a beautiful young naked witch clinging to him. In many ways, he was struggling with the concept of right and honour, and the desire his hormone-filled body was telling him to give in to.

That the air was filled with female pheromones never crossed his mind.

He had been unconsciously caressing her thighs and bum and had been considering taking further liberties when he remembered this was a twelve-year-old girl and not the sensuous adult woman he remembered. He had moved his hands up to her back and sides and absolutely adored how warm and soft she felt. Even in the places he felt he shouldn't have been touching.

Still, his greatest fear was how they would react when they discovered how old he was even though his body was only twelve.

Padma managed to pull her arms from around Parvati without waking her. She slowly scooted and rolled over to face Harry. Sure enough, Luna was straddled fully across him with her head currently facing Padma. Luna looked so angelic, Padma couldn't help but sigh at how comfortable the young witch looked.

Harry looked over at Padma and smiled. "Good morning, Beautiful," he said.

Padma propped herself up on her elbow, leaned over and kissed Harry on the forehead. "Good morning, My Handsome Lord," she cooed, then looked at Luna again. "She certainly looks comfortable. Let me help you get her laying elsewhere," Padma offered, a naughty smile on her lips.

Lavender was still sleeping, and was curled tightly around Harry and Luna's leg. Padma scooted down towards the foot of the bed and circled around to the far side of Lavender.

Applying gentle pressure to Lavender's shoulder and hip, she managed to move Lavender so she was now on her back. Padma then straddled Harry's leg and pulled Luna's leg over and, with Harry's help, rolled Luna onto her side. "Scoot up next to Pav and pull Luna with you," Padma instructed, "then roll her onto her back

so her leg is almost touching Lavender. Once she is safely on her back roll back into the space where I was."

Harry did as he was told. Once he was clear of Luna, Padma gently pulled on Luna's shoulder and hip until she was now straddling Lavender. Padma then tucked the covers firmly in around the two girls.

"Okay now move towards the centre again, Harry," Padma instructed in the same voice. Harry, once more, followed Padma's instructions. Padma then gathered up all of her courage and straddled Harry and relaxed on him, turning her head to the side and closing her eyes.

"Um. Padma? What are you doing?" Harry asked.

She opened her eyes, lifted her head up and looked into his eyes. He could see her eyes were filling with tears, a deep hurt behind them. She started moving herself off of him but he held her in place and moved her back.

"Padma? I didn't say get off of me. I asked what you were doing." he explained.

"I'm sorry. I thought you wouldn't mind if I..." she started, but Harry lifted a finger to her lips.

"Hush, you silly little witch. First and foremost, I am male. That means I am stupid when it comes to the female mind and need things explained to me. Preferably in small words," he explained. This got her to laugh for a moment through her tears.

"And of course I don't mind. The second thing you need to understand is that I was not just saying those words yesterday. You may think it sudden, possibly even something less than what it really is. But I do love you," he admitted. She lifted her head up and looked at him. Before she could respond, he put a fingertip on her lips.

"Before you interrupt me, you need to know. I do love you. But I have to be honest when I say that Hermione has first place, with Luna a very close second. Can you live with being third place, with

the understanding that I will do my best to keep you from ever feeling that way?" he begged.

"Harry," Padma whispered, "if this is what it feels like to be in third place, I can't even imagine what you do for Hermione and Luna."

"So I take it that means you don't mind being third?" he asked with a small smile.

Padma slid herself up until she was nose to nose with Harry, her lips just a hair's breadth away from his. "Not now," she said and kissed him. When he didn't pull away, she lifted her head slightly again and finished her thought, "Not ever." She sat up and removed her nightshirt then lay back down.

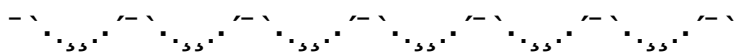
She kissed him again, slowly running her tongue along his lips, asking his permission to enter. He parted them and the two of them gently explored each other's mouth.

While Padma thought she was experienced in oral sensuality, whatever it was Harry was doing to her tongue and mouth with his tongue made her feel alive for the first time in her young life. He was rubbing gentle circles in her back.

One of his hands slid into her knickers and caressed her bum while his tongue continued to administer an amazingly sensual dance with her own. He gripped her by the small of the back and her bum and suddenly she was laying on her back. He was hovering over her.

She was both afraid and excited. She suddenly wondered what it would feel like to have him inside of her... filling her. Smita had described to them the sense of completeness it gave to have the man you love coupled deeply within your body. Padma wanted that right now so much. She ached for it.

She looked down between them and saw the tip of his manhood coming out of the waistband of his pyjamas. She had unwrapped her arms from Harry and was working to untie the drawstrings of her knickers, when Harry sat up and grasped her wrists and pulled them over her head.



Harry was gasping for air. He had been so caught up in the passion of the moment, that he had very nearly claimed Padma without any preparation or care with what happened afterwards. "Merlin! I haven't even taken a contraception potion. Just what I need to do – get one of them pregnant before Riddle is even dealt with," he thought to himself, "and we haven't laid down the rune clusters or performed the ritual to make her first time pain-free. What the hell are you thinking, Potter!"

"I'm sorry, Padma. I almost took advantage of you. If I am going to be your first, I want it to be special and wonderful and not something either of us regrets later. Believe me when I say, I find you quite nearly irresistible. You're beautiful. You taste good. You smell good. You're sexier than a Veela to me. But you're only thirteen. I don't want to make a mess of what we have by losing my head to my hormones. Please don't be upset for me wanting it to be perfect," Harry pleaded. In exasperation, he admitted, "I haven't even taken a contraception potion."

Padma was utterly shocked. She had just finished untying the drawstrings of her knickers, when Harry grabbing her wrists had pulled them right out from under her. In the heat of the moment, she had been prepared to let him claim her. To take her and ravish her for as long as he was willing and able to do so.

But here he was, holding her in an incredibly vulnerable position, and he was apologising to her for taking advantage of the situation. For getting caught up in the moment. For not preparing to prevent her from becoming pregnant.

She could hear her father crowing with pride about how his daughter had been fertile enough to give her future husband a pregnancy even before they were formally married, a marriage ceremony she was certain would happen at wand-point, if necessary.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Any other boy would have claimed her, pleased himself and rolled off, treating her like a soiled and used toy. But Harry, she thought, stopped before he started and then apologised for getting that far. She was about to tell him no apology was needed when Parvati entered the conversation.

"That had to be both one of the sexiest things I have ever watched and one of the sweetest gestures I have ever seen a boy make," Parvati said.

Both Padma and Harry looked at Parvati with guilty expressions on their face, only to see Parvati looking at them with happy tears trickling down her face. Parvati then looked down at Harry's waistband, a blush came to her cheeks, and a giggle escaped her lips. "Is that a wand in your waistband, My Lord, or are you just feeling frisky this morning?" she asked, and her giggles exploded into full-blown laughter.

Harry had no idea what she was talking about so looked down at his waistband and saw what it was she was commenting on. The fact that looking down caused him to see Padma's ripe, hairless womanhood fully exposed, not an inch away from the exposed tip of his manhood certainly didn't help.

What did help, however, was Padma's reaction. Apparently, Parvati's laughter was contagious, and Padma's laughter was enough to calm him down and laugh at the situation as well.

He put Padma's hands together over her head and interlocked the fingers of one of his hands with both of hers. He kissed her nose then slid down and kissed her lips. She opened her mouth to allow him entry, but he slid down again and nibbled her jaw.

As Padma moaned, Parvati's eyes grew wide. Smita had done this to Lavender once. Both twins had experienced this first hand before. Parvati swallowed nervously. "Harry may not claim her today," Parvati thought, "but she will become his shortly."

He placed his hands on her arms and slid them slowly. Seductively. Softly. From her elbows to her armpits. He kissed her throat and slowly moved his hands down her sides, kissing the top of her breastbone.

Padma was struggling to not move, but those soft lips and hands moving down her body caused her to jump just a bit each time his lips touched her. The anticipation was building in her.

His hands trailed inward below her breasts as he kissed her between them. His warm lips felt like they were burning their way

down her torso as he kissed her again, his thumbs running circles around her navel and moved to her hips as his tongue teased its way down her stomach.

He continued moving his lips down, sliding his hands and his body down. Just as she knew he was about to kiss her secret place, his voice broke in on the sensual spell he had her under.

"I can't help it when I am surrounded by such beautiful and sexy witches." His hand trailed off just before they reached her thighs, causing her breath to catch.

"One thing is clear, though," Harry explained. "I definitely need a cold shower this morning," he said with a chuckle. He released Padma, pulled his pyjama bottoms up, stood up and walked off the foot of the bed, headed into the bath; the sounds of the latch being locked echoed in his wake.

Padma gasped. She could still feel his lips everywhere on her body he had kissed her. She balled her fists and pounded the mattress on either side of her as she screeched softly in frustration.

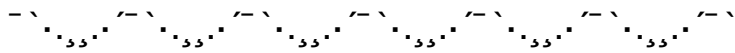
Parvati, who was almost as tightly wound, began giggling. Then she began laughing. Padma looked at her crossly, before she, too, was once more overcome with laughter, though her joviality was tempered by her frustration.

A very sleepy Luna looked over at the twins, "What's so funny?" she asked, as she sat up. This caused Lavender to wake up and stare at the naked little witch she had in her arms.

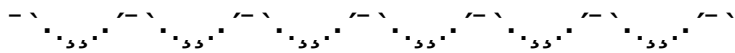
"Let's just say Harry woke up with you laying on him and he made it clearly evident he thinks you're one sexy little witch," Parvati said with a smile.

"Merlin! You're not kidding!" Lavender gasped, as she ran her eyes up and down Luna.

Luna looked down at Lavender then looked down at her position and blushed to her shoulders. She lay back down on Lavender and kissed her on the nose. "Thank you," she purred, which caused Lavender to deeply blush.



Chapter 9 – Of Signs and Potions



After breakfast, McGonagall explained to Padma and Luna they would now be attending classes on Harry's schedule as the Deputy Headmistress felt it would be less disruptive to handle two extra students in a class than three or four. After she departed, Harry approached Auror Shacklebolt and asked him to escort them to the Potions class early so he could discuss this change with Professor Snape.

They arrived in the classroom to find Snape writing the relevant information for the day's lesson on the board. He finished writing the line he was on and turned around. He nodded at Kingsley in recognition. He then turned his full attention to Harry and the girls.

"Potions Master Snape, I was unaware as to whether the Deputy Headmistress informed you Miss Padma Patil and Miss Luna Lovegood would be attending all of my classes until the end of term. As such, I wanted to ensure you were aware prior to class so any interruption would be minimized," Harry said respectfully.

Severus had been in the Great Hall when Harry had forgiven all past transgressions. He had received a full report from Draco about his discussion with Harry. He had also been informed by all of his prefects and several of the other Slytherins about Harry's accusations regarding Professor Lockhart.

On receiving this information, he had confirmed with every Slytherin that no Slytherin female was to be alone with Lockhart and they were to communicate any such detentions to him immediately.

Severus had begun his own investigation into the matter and decided that, if Harry's facts were correct, a few pureblood fathers would be receiving discreet missives concerning the DADA professor. The continued safety of their daughters' virtue, he was certain, would be at the forefront of their minds.

"The Deputy Headmistress did inform me of this change, Lord Potter, but I do appreciate your efforts in minimizing disruption to this class," Snape stated. "May I address your charges?" he asked.

Harry nodded.

Snape turned his attention to Luna and Padma, "Miss Patil and Miss Lovegood, as Miss Lovegood is in first year, I would appreciate the two of you working with Lord Potter in place of Miss Granger," he said, then looked at Harry, "if this is acceptable to you, Lord Potter."

"I fully agree that some of the work being done may be beyond Luna's current ability and having two students at," Harry's eyes looked at Padma then back at Snape, "or above level will increase the safety and learning opportunity for her and prevent her from falling behind her classmates."

"If you would like, begin copying the assignment while awaiting the rest of the class to arrive and get settled," Snape said.

Other than Ron receiving a detention for yelling at Harry about working with Luna and Padma, Potions was uneventful and Harry was pleasantly surprised to find that Luna actually was more adept at potions than he had been at the same age. In point of fact, she was easily Padma's equal. He also noted Padma had a copy of a book he had used daily in his time with the Unspeakables.

"Padma, how do you know about 'Materia Magica'?" Harry queried when it wouldn't disturb her concentration.

Padma looked up and smiled at him, "Papa insisted on purchasing both Parvati and I a copy of it when he saw it was missing from the list of required texts and tomes. He said it was critical to excelling in the brewing of potions, elixirs and flasks as well as when performing transmutations."

Harry looked over to where Parvati and Lavender were concentrating on their assignment, and sitting between them was a copy of the book as well, which both girls frequently referenced.

Padma had also been carefully watching Neville and Seamus as they brewed their potion and was demonstrating to Neville how to prepare some of the ingredients.

Harry took note that, while Snape was watching Padma show Neville how to slice the newt eyes correctly, he said nothing.

At the end of the period, Neville and Seamus received an E for the day, which was in sharp contrast to their normal nerves-induced disaster and seemed to bolster Neville's confidence.

As the clock chimed the end of class, Snape spoke up, "Lord Potter, if you and your entourage would be kind enough to stay behind a few moments."

Harry had just finished helping the girls clean up and put their books and materials away. He nodded at Snape and waited for the remaining students to depart. As Neville walked past him, Harry asked him to wait outside for them. Neville looked at him nervously but nodded.

Draco, Gregory, Blaise, Pansy, Millicent, Vincent, and a sad-looking Tracey all nodded at Harry and the girls as they departed.

Snape walked over to them and stood in front of Harry. "Lord Potter, I should like to say I am impressed with the improvement I note in your Potions work. Your brewing was acceptable and your preparation technique was near text book accurate. Please take an 'E' for the day. May I address your charges?" he asked.

"You may, Sir," Harry responded with a nod. In his mind, he was shocked to his very toes.

Snape addressed Luna, "Miss Lovegood, while you have consistently received an 'O' in my class for first year potions, I am impressed you demonstrated a knowledge and familiarity with the lesson in class. If you maintain this level of knowledge for the remainder of the term, I am going to recommend to the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress that you enter third year potions next term, if this is acceptable to you. "Please take an 'O' for the day."

"I would be honoured, Potions Master," Luna gushed. Snape nodded then addressed Padma.

"Miss Patil, in addition to assisting with your own team, I noted you tutored Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Finnigan on the proper methods of

preparing some of the ingredients. I have no doubt that, due to this additional assistance, you prevented their potion from destroying yet another cauldron. Please take an 'O' for the day." He paused a moment, then almost smiled at his next comment. "Miss Patil, if, as I suspect, you are anywhere near as driven to excel in your work as Miss Granger, I would ask that, for an additional extra assignment, you tutor both Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Finnigan in Potions. If you are willing to do so, I shall inform them of this as an option at lunch today."

Padma blushed and looked down, "Thank you, Potions Master. I would be happy to help them."

Snape then looked at the two remaining girls. "Miss Patil, Miss Brown. I had considered in the past splitting the two of you up to prevent the class from being distracted by your endless chatter while brewing. Today, I was pleasantly surprised to watch as you focused on your brewing and produced a potion I would be willing to consume. Higher praise, I cannot give. I would not wish to see a return to your previous behaviour in this class, and applaud whatever or whomever has brought about this change. Both of you have earned an 'O' today for your serious approach to the day's lesson."

In unison, they chorused, "Thank you, Potions Master." He nodded, then once more addressed Harry.

"Lord Potter, would you care to explain the reason you and your entourage address me as 'Potions Master' rather than 'Professor'?" he asked in genuine curiosity. He truly wanted to know the reason for the sudden change.

Harry grinned for a moment, causing Snape to arch his eyebrow and begin to form a sneer. Harry sobered and addressed Snape formally. "Sir. It has become evident to me, based on my experience with some of the staff here, most notably our previous and our current Defence professors, that the title of 'professor' indicates that on most days the person knows how many fingers they have on one hand because they can usually count that high. In some cases, the title implies little more than a glorified child minder," Harry said, collecting his thoughts and not seeing Snape beginning to bristle at the comment.

When Harry continued, however, the bristling immediately subsided.

"As a recognised master in the field of brewing potions, elixirs, and flasks, and being capable of performing transmutations of a complexity deserving of a mastery, however, means that at least three grand master alchemists declared on their life and magic that the individual received the title based upon an appropriately demonstrated skill in the art of brewing and alchemy proven during rigorous testing. It is truly an earned title, and is based on criteria I both respect and applaud," Harry explained.

He then brought the full weight of his attention on Snape. "I believed you would prefer myself and those I surround myself with to address you with a title I felt projected far more respect for you than the empty platitude that is 'professor', Potions Master."

Severus was speechless for a few moments. Never before had any student, save for those in Slytherin, demonstrated a knowledge of what his mastery actually had required to attain, or seemed to understand what it meant to him.

"You are well-informed, Lord Potter. I thank you for honouring the title which you hold with respect and take no offence, and do prefer my earned title rather than 'professor'," he replied, bowing his head briefly to Harry in salute.

Harry returned the bow.

"You five should run off to lunch now. You need fuel to feed your minds. Thank you for your time, Lord Potter. Ladies," he said, bowing his head once more.

Harry bowed his head in departure, but the four girls were overwhelmed with their O's and curtsied to Snape out of thanks.

The five of them exited, leaving a still somewhat surprised Snape in their wake.

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Neville nervously waited outside the door of the Potions lab in the company of seven Slytherins. After a few minutes, he had

considered going in to check on Harry and his girls, as Neville thought of them, when the door opened and they walked out.

Harry looked about at a nervous Neville eyeing the six Slytherins who were mostly looking outward except Tracey, who watched the door with intensity, and focused on Harry when she saw him.

"Draco, Gregory, Vincent, Blaise, Millicent, Pansy, Tracey," Harry said, meeting each one of their gazes, "if for nothing else, thank you for remaining and keeping Neville company, even though he is not a member of your house," Harry said.

Draco was clearly their spokesperson. "With students being attacked, we did not want to leave Mr. Longbottom alone," Draco stated, then meaningfully glanced at Tracey and approached Harry and whispered, "and I believe Miss Davis needed to discuss something with you privately."

Draco stepped back, "We hope to see you all at lunch today. I understand dessert today is treacle tart, which is, I believe, Harry's favourite."

Harry nodded at Draco and smiled, somewhat surprised Draco would know such a detail.

The Slytherins, except for Tracey and Blaise, left in the direction of the Great Hall. Blaise took Neville's arm and walked a short distance away, starting a conversation with Neville about the day's potion and congratulating him on his 'Exceeds Expectations'.

"Miss Davis, you needed to speak with me?" Harry asked.

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Tracey looked around nervously, then nodded, and looked at her shoes.

Harry could see the fear and trepidation radiating from Tracey. "Miss Davis? Or if you don't object, Tracey?"

Tracey looked up briefly and shook her head, then nodded, before looking back down.

Harry approached and gently cupped her chin and drew her eyes up to his. He saw the twin streaks down her cheeks.

"Whatever is the matter, Tracey? What are you afraid of?" he asked.

She shook her head, then, much to Harry's surprise, threw her arms around him and sobbed onto his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and the girls surrounded her, trying to comfort her.

Harry could hear her incoherent speech, but could make no sense of it. Three words he thought he heard were "Penny", "Hermione", and "Daphne".

Harry called out, "Mippy."

The familiar little elf popped in, "How can Mippy be helping Harry Potter and his Ladies?"

Harry smiled. "Hello, Mippy. Can you pop us to our quarters, including Tracey?" he asked.

Mippy focused on Tracey for a moment. "Young Miss is afraid of you, but wants to be with you. Mippy can do this," she said, took hold of Harry and Tracey and popped them to the Potter suite. She then popped back and forth twice more, each time taking two of the girls.

Mippy had popped them all onto the bed in the master suite. The girls popped in to find Tracey laying next to Harry on top of the covers.

The other girls sat around them and looked at one another momentarily. They were all thinking the same thing - "Sixth?" - then focused once more on Tracey.

Tracey's sobbing began to subside. She looked up at Harry as she realised she was laying next to him and being held by him in his bed.

"Can you tell me what's wrong, Tracey?" Harry asked.

Her jaw went slack, but she nodded. She seemed to try and talk but no words would come out.

Luna, who was sitting on the other side of Harry, leaned over and whispered softly into Tracey's ear then leaned back. Tracey looked at Luna, then looked at Harry, then looked at Luna again and nodded.

Harry turned and looked at Luna, who was already looking at him.

"Harry, Tracey is afraid you will be very angry with her. Can you promise her you will do your utmost to not be angry with her?" Luna asked.

Harry looked back at Tracey. "Tracey, I don't know why you believe I would be angry with you, but I promise you I will do my best to not be angry with you, but if I do get angry, I will do my best to not display that anger towards you," Harry said earnestly, gently running the back of his hand over her cheek. He watched as the girl closed her eyes and leaned her head into his hand.

"Remember," he said, "I meant what I said about blanket forgiveness."

She opened her eyes and nodded as she returned his smile. Then her smile rapidly faded and she looked down at her hands, as she began plucking at the comforter.

"Daphne, Penelope, Hermione, and I were walking back from the library," she managed to get out before her voice broke.

Harry pulled her head down to his shoulder and rested his cheek against her temple. "It's okay. Are you friends with Hermione and Penelope, as well?" he asked.

She raised her head then nodded. Then silently shook her head and began plucking at the comforter again. "I thought we were, but I don't think they'll want to be my friend any longer," she confessed.

"Why would you think that, Tracey? Hermione is a fairly forgiving person. Just look at her friendship with Weasley," he said.

She looked up at him then back down again at her hands. "She wouldn't want me as her friend. She... Penny... I... Daphne..." she began. After a few moments of silence, she looked up at him, tears

running down her cheeks, "I ran away!" she screamed and collapsed against him as sobs wracked her body.

Harry looked at Padma and Parvati, who were on the other side of Tracey from him. They both shrugged their shoulders.

"Tracey, when did you run?" Harry asked, then he realised what she was talking about. "You were with them when they became petrified?!" he asked in surprise.

She vigorously nodded her head, but continued sobbing. Harry noted Padma, Parvati, and Lavender looking incredulously at Tracey. Luna leaned into Harry's other side, and wrapped her arms around him in an effort to comfort him as she felt his emotions building.

"And you saw one or more of them get petrified and you ran away?" he asked.

Again, she nodded, but her sobbing intensified. The twins and Lavender each reached out to touch Tracey to help comfort her, but Harry shook his head at them slightly.

"And you're afraid they won't be your friends after they are revived?" he queried quietly.

Once again, she nodded, her sobs abating slightly.

"And you're afraid that running away would make me angry with you?" he asked slowly, rubbing his hand up and down her shoulder then pulled her head against him. He gave her some time to collect herself.

Her sobs quieted and her shoulders stopped quaking. She nodded against him.

"Tracey, have you any clue at all what it is that is causing the petrification?" Harry asked, afraid that if she knew, he would have to either keep her detained somehow until he was able to enter the Chamber, or that he would need to accelerate his time table and allow control of the youngest Weasley to slip away from him.

She shook her head, then tried to bury her face further into his chest.

"Tracey, what makes you think that, if Hermione Granger, Daphne Greengrass, and Penelope Clearwater were unable to prevent their own petrification, you would have any better chance against whatever it was?" Harry asked rhetorically.

She pushed away, looked up at him sharply and was about to speak when he cut her off.

"And by what right would I, or anyone else," he said, looking at each of the girls in turn, "even consider being angry with you for preventing yourself from getting petrified?"

"But..." Tracey began, but was once more cut off by Harry.

"You could have been killed! Instead, you ran. You then had the courage to tell me, even though you thought I would be terribly upset! Angry, even!" Harry exclaimed softly.

Tracey just nodded at him in agreement with how she had felt.

Harry kissed her temple gently. "I am not angry, Tracey. Not with you. Not with anyone in Slytherin. I am certain, without a doubt, that all three of the girls laying petrified in the Infirmary will remain your friends when they are revived," Harry explained.

"In fact, since they are petrified, you can help us to keep them entertained. Would you like that?" he asked.

"I'd do anything to make this hurt in my chest go away, Harry," Tracey whispered.

"T-r-a-c-e-y," Harry said, drawing her name out, "no one here is upset with you for not laying petrified in the Infirmary or worse." He put the palm of his hand lightly on the middle of her chest with his fingers pointed down. He rubbed small circles, barely moving his hand, then slid his hand down to her stomach. "Let go of it, Tracey. Just let it go," he whispered to her.

She nodded at him, her eyes wide as she was a bit surprised at his familiarity. The hand on her stomach felt deliciously warm, though. The tension in her chest was all but gone at his first touch, but the small circles he had rubbed had a calming effect on her. It was almost as if he had cleansed the guilt from her soul.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, his concern for her clear in his voice.

She nodded vigorously at him, then stopped and smiled. "Thank you, Harry," she said, then looked around at all of the girls. "Thank you all," she said.

"Would you like to join us for lunch?" Luna asked.

Tracey's eyes opened wide in realisation. "Blaise is waiting for me! He is my partner in the halls now," Tracey explained. Luna scooted off the bed and motioned for Lavender, Padma and Parvati to scoot off as well.

Luna and Lavender reached over to help Tracey scoot off the bed as Padma and Parvati reached over to help Harry off.

As Harry reached the edge of the bed into their waiting arms. Parvati gave him a brief kiss on the cheek.

Tracey watched open-mouthed as he turned to Padma, who gave him a searing kiss.

"I thought Harry was sweet on Hermione," Tracey said to Luna.

"Oh Hermione is most definitely his first love, Tracey. He just happens to love Padma, too," Luna explained.

Lavender leaned over and gave Tracey a hug, mostly to reassure her about Lavender not hating her, but also to provide her some physical comfort while she explained. "Harry also loves Luna, Parvati, and, amazingly, me, for some reason," Lavender gushed.

Luna looked over at Lavender, "Lavender, Harry loves you like he loves me – unconditionally." She then looked conspiratorially at Lavender then eyed Tracey briefly. Lavender nodded.

Tracey, somewhat oblivious to the byplay as she watched Padma's and Harry's cheeks slowly distend as their tongues played in each others mouth, felt Luna wrap an arm around her waist and her soft lips against her ear.

"Would you like Harry to do that to you?" Luna whispered.

Tracey nodded every so slightly.

"Would you like Padma to do that to you?" Lavender whispered from the other side.

Tracey nodded a bit more noticeably.

"Send your father an owl," Luna whispered. "Tell him to speak with Gringott's," she continued, "and they will take care of everything."

Tracey turned first to look at Lavender, who nodded with a serious expression on her face. She then turned to Luna, who was also nodding, but with a pleased smile on her face.

Tracey then startled them. "Blaise! I have to go to lunch with Blaise or Draco and Millicent will be upset with me!" she exclaimed.

Harry and Padma broke their kiss and looked at Tracey.

"Mippy!" Harry called. The house elf appeared before he could release Padma from his arms.

"Lord Harry called and Mippy is here," she announced.

"Thank you, Mippy. Could you take us back to Blaise and Neville, please?" Harry asked.

"Lord Harry make house elves feel so special, saying pleases and thank yous," Mippy gushed.

She grabbed the still-joined hands of Padma and Harry and popped them to the hall halfway between the Potions classroom and the Great Hall, which shocked both Blaise and Neville.

Mippy disappeared, then popped the Parvati and Lavender, and finally Luna and Tracey to the hallway.

Blaise looked significantly relieved when Luna and Tracey appeared. "I was worried about you when you disappeared," Blaise gushed in relief, then looked around sheepishly, "all of you, I mean."

"You needn't ever worry about someone when they're with Harry," Luna and Lavender quipped slightly out of synchronisation, causing Harry and Tracey to smile and the twins to giggle.

Tracey walked up to Harry and shyly kissed him on the cheek, "Thank you for everything, Harry."

Harry gently brushed the back of his hand across her cheek and leaned over and kissed her forehead. "If you need anything, please let me know. Anyone who is Hermione's friend is my friend," he said.

Harry looked sideways towards Blaise, "If you would, Mr. Zabini, I would appreciate you escorting Miss Davis to the Great Hall. I would like to speak to you later, but I have a matter I need to discuss with Mr Longbottom over lunch."

"I shall protect her with my life, Lord Potter," Blaise said, bowing his head towards Harry, who turned to look at him fully.

"For you, Blaise, it's 'Harry'. Just 'Harry'," Harry explained with a welcoming smile.

Blaise nodded, then turned towards Tracey and bowed with a flourish, "Miss Davis, would you be so kind to allow me to escort you to lunch?" he asked formally.

Tracey curtsied, her giggle almost stifled, "It would be my pleasure, Mr. Zabini," she said in reply, taking his offered arm. The two of them walked down the corridor and disappeared around the corner.

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Harry looked back at Neville, silently hoping the fragile, fearful boy he saw before him would grow today, somewhat, into a man.

"Hello, Neville. Would you care to join us for lunch today? I have something I would like to speak with you about," Harry explained.

Neville looked at Harry, then looked at the four girls. Four girls who were all intelligent, beautiful, and followed Harry everywhere he went. He blushed and smiled nervously, "Are you sure you want me along?" he asked, once more respectfully looking at each of the girls.

Harry looked at Neville. "Neville, did you know your parents were my parents best friends? That your mum is my godmother and that my mum was your godmother?"

Based on Neville's incredulous expression, this was all new information.

"I'm told that you and I used to play together until my parents went into hiding. We were supposed to be raised as brothers, Neville," Harry explained.

"H...h...how do you know this, Harry?" Neville asked nervously. In addition to his nervousness, Neville felt two other emotions trying to rip free of the prisons he had built around them. An overwhelming sadness at the loss of his parents in one of the most horrific manners he could think of, and a rage that threatened to boil his blood.

"My mum left me journals, Neville. She asked in one of her last entries that, should both of them perish before I attained my majority, that I claim my lordship, find a pretty girl, and make as many Potters as that girl would let me," Harry said, a tear leaking down his cheek as he remembered finding and reading his parents' journals and letters to him. He wiped the tear away and looked up into the eyes of a now-blushing Neville.

Harry gestured towards the direction of the Great Hall. "Perhaps we can walk and talk? I don't want the Ladies to miss a meal," Harry said.

Neville walked next to Harry and the girls followed behind, whispering back and forth to one another.

Harry periodically felt a small spike of emotion from Luna. At the moment, it was happiness coupled with a sense of belonging.

"Neville, did your Gran tell you the Wizengamot has declared your father unfit to be head of House Longbottom?" Harry whispered.

"What?!" Neville exclaimed, his voice echoing down the corridor, as he stopped and looked at Harry. Neville then looked back and saw all four girls staring at him wide-eyed in surprise. "M sorry," he mumbled then continued walking.



A~~~~~N

I am posting this early to help with an endeavour I strongly support and ask for your help with as well.

The video project Robst helped some kids with in regard to anti-knife crime can be found at the link below

[http://www.syp.org.uk/we-ctv-2012-13-region-1-north-east-central-W21page-421-](http://www.syp.org.uk/we-ctv-2012-13-region-1-north-east-central-W21page-421)

Please support Robst and the school children he worked with and vote for Taylor High School's entry.

If you enjoy Harry/Hermione stories, please check out Robst's fine contributions.

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## ~~~~~ Chapter 10 – Confessions and Lamentations ~~~~~

When they returned to Hogwarts, Neville was not merely angry. Anger implied a rational component. Neville was insanely outraged. But he hid it well. He could also list the people he now trusted completely to eight, and three of those were basajaunak.

Their first stop, instead of the Great Hall for lunch, had been the Infirmary, where Hagrid and a tall black auror named Shacklebolt assured Harry that Lockhart would be allowed nowhere near the Infirmary, even if said professor was on the verge of death, and that His Hermione was safe.

Harry spent a few minutes in a one-sided, whispered conversation with Hermione which ended with him kissing her cheek.

Harry had then given the girls the choice of coming with them. It was fairly obvious the way they had been acting all morning that they would be separated from Harry only under pain of death.

In Neville's opinion, though she was the youngest, Luna was the leader of the four girls. When Harry had posed the question to them, Padma, Parvati, and Lavender had all looked to Luna and it was Luna who had responded to Harry.

"Harry, we don't feel completely safe if we're not with you," Luna had said, huge grey puppy dog eyes looking up at Harry as a single tear

rolled down her cheek. Harry had almost automatically pulled her into an embrace and kissed her forehead before they all began following Harry to an area of the corridor without any tapestries or paintings.

Neville had almost laughed at how well Luna had already trained Harry.

Harry then had all the girls hold onto him and offered his other hand to Neville. While Neville had used portkeys in the past, two things surprised him.

The first was that he had been told since he was young, and he had read in "Hogwarts: A History" that no form of magical travel worked within the wards of Hogwarts.

The second was that, when Neville had portkeyed in the past, it had been one of the most nauseating experiences in his life. The twirling and spinning had him regurgitating things he had forgotten he had eaten from days prior.

This portkey was different.

For one, they had portkeyed directly from a corridor deep within the bowels of the castle.

For another, they had been standing in the corridor one moment, and the next moment they were standing on the grand marble floor inside the lobby of the main Gringott's branch in London.

That is when things went from odd to surreal for Neville.

The goblin guards at the inner doors actually held the doors open for Harry and the girls. They held them open for Neville as well, but he suspected they only did this because he was clearly in Harry's group.

The next thing that happened to the group was that the concierge actually approached them and told Harry that his account manager would be meeting him in the lobby shortly and gave Harry a small bow, which Harry returned in kind. Neville knew pureblood wizards who would trade their daughters' virtue to have the goblins act obsequiously towards them. These goblins seemed to be treating Harry as if they considered him an equal.

"Neville, I realise you may be a bit out of your depth here, but first and foremost, these people are members of a race called Basajaunak. Do not ever refer to them by the most-hated term wizards gave them of 'goblins'. They would sooner feed you to a dragon than speak to you after referring to them as such," Harry explained.

"The next thing, is you must treat them with respect. This means that should they bow to you, you will give them a polite, respectful bow in return. If you feel they are treating you unusually nice, bow to them to reflect this. Do not bow quickly or in an exaggerated fashion as this is considered disrespectful. And under no circumstances show them fear," Harry said, giving Neville a look of steel.

Neville nodded, but was still nervous.

Harry looked away from Neville as he heard footsteps approaching. It was rather difficult, after all, to sneak across a polished marble floor in a suit made from steel plates and rings.

Steelgrip walked up to Harry and bowed at nearly the same moment Harry bowed.

"Lord Potter, to what do we owe this honour?" Steelgrip asked, then noted the presence of the girls with the Potter family crest on their cloaks and robes and also noted Neville.

"Well met, Senior Special Accounts Manager Steelgrip. Other than this greeting, all of the business we have with Gringott's today is for your ears and the staff of Gringott's only," Harry said, a guarded tone in his voice.

Steelgrip raised an eyebrow, "But of course, Lord Potter. Please, follow me."

Steelgrip led the way with Neville following behind him. This was one case where Harry insisted the girls precede him. If someone was going to go after his girls, they would have to go through Steelgrip and Neville or through him. They arrived at a conference room that Neville could swear was carved from solid marble.

Steelgrip directed all of them to their seats. "Now, Lord Potter, how may Gringott's be of service to you?" he asked.

Harry looked at the basajaun, "Steelgrip, please call me Harry. You know I only drag that title out to impress the little people, and no one present, and certainly no basajaun I have ever met, fits that description," Harry chastised.

Steelgrip smiled. "You are, of course, correct, Harry."

Harry nodded, then reached into his robes and removed several pieces of folded parchment. He unfolded them. "Along with this additional list I have made," Harry said, gesturing with the parchment, "there is one item I feel needs to be immediately addressed."

Harry gestured towards Neville, "This is Neville Franklin Longbottom, the last scion of the House of Longbottom, and one of my best friends. He was unaware, until less than half an hour ago, of the Wizengamot's decision to declare his father incompetent and was unaware of the requirement he claim lordship and dominion over House Longbottom lest he lose most of the House's power and property."

Steelgrip turned to Neville. "Do you wish to claim the lordship of House Longbottom? It was stripped from your father, as Harry indicated, ten years ago. If you do not wish to do so, you will lose all right and title to the Longbottom's seats on the Wizengamot as well as all lineage oaths of fealty shall be voided."

Neville looked at Harry, who just nodded. He was about to address Steelgrip, when a hollow voice spoke.

"Leave behind the mantle of youth. You are at a crossroads in your life. Honour the memory of your father and your mother and all those who came before, but live in their shadow no longer. Discard the focus of your forbearer and come forth into your rightful place in the world, Longbottom of Longbottom."

Neville was looking in shock at the diminutive little blonde, whose eyes were rolled into the back of her head, speaking with an eerily dead voice, her hands flat on the table and her head thrown back.



Parvati and Lavender were holding onto one another in fear as Luna's voice unnaturally reverberated through the chamber.

Padma was gripping Harry's arm, not so much afraid of what was happening, but afraid for the little witch who didn't seem to be in control of herself.

Harry was looking at Luna in concern. He had known she was a seer of some vision. This, however, was a manifestation he had not seen before.

Luna suddenly sat bolt upright and looked around the room. She then seemed to collapse in on herself as she began to cry. Since she was sitting next to Harry, she curled up into his side and began sobbing. Harry pulled her onto his lap and did his best to comfort her.

Steelgrip held his hand up to get Harry's attention. Harry continued to physically provide soothing comfort to Luna, but looked over at the basajaun. Neville also turned his attention to Steelgrip. Lavender was more concerned with Luna's well-being, and she thought that if she needed to know something from the conversation, they would tell her later. Right now she had a distraught witch she cared about who needed someone focused on her.

"She is Lady Luna Selene Potter from the House of Lovegood and the House of Stuart?" Steelgrip asked.

"She is. So it is as I suspected and our magics bonded to one another?" Harry asked in return.

"They must have. Our scryers discovered it and our administrators checked the Ministry records. She is your second wife," Steelgrip said, "Lady Hermione Jane Potter from the House of York and the House of Lancaster is your first wife."

"Potter?" Padma asked, a sad tone to her voice.

"Miss Patil, before you become too upset, please be patient. There are many things to explain, and while Harry was asked to come back this week, I am pleased he is here today, and even more pleased he brought you and your sister with him, as it will simplify things greatly," Steelgrip said before turning to Neville.

"Master Longbottom, considering that I have only ever read tales of the legend of clear-speaking seers before, how would you like to proceed?" Steelgrip inquired.

Neville squared his shoulders and addressed the basajaun, "I would like to claim my birthright, Senior Special Account Manager Steelgrip," Neville said with authority.

"Very well then," Steelgrip responded. He wrote on a piece of parchment and pressed a gem embedded in the table in front of him. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Steelgrip barked a sound and the door opened. Another basajaun stepped in and respectfully bowed to Steelgrip before handing him a piece of parchment and leaving the room once more.

Steelgrip looked it over before placing it in front of Neville. "This is the wording of the claimant for House Longbottom. With your wand in hand, pointed at your heart, read these words aloud," Steelgrip explained.

Neville quickly read over the document, then stood, pointed his wand at his heart and said, " I, Neville Franklin Longbottom, do swear by my magic that I am, to the best of my knowledge, the last living and capable Longbottom. By right of ancestry and conquest, I do claim Lordship of House Longbottom and dominion over all other houses so sworn and so taken. So mote it be."

As he spoke the words, he could feel his magic build. He had never felt his magic to ever be quite this powerful before. As he was nearing the end of the words, he felt as if he was going to burst from the power building within him. As he finished the recitation, the magic reached a peak and channelled through the wand, washing over Neville in a red wave of magic. The magic overpowered the wand and in the blink of an eye, the wand had burned to a white ash which fell as dust to the floor. Neville did not notice this as the magic was measuring him. Judging him. Tearing through a barrier another had placed on his power. Another barrier was burned through. Then another.

Harry watched in fascination as Neville finished reciting the claimant's oath. He was then covered in a crackling red field of static. Through the field, Harry could see Neville's back was arched. He then seemed to bounce off the inner surfaces of the field. Neville's

screams were a bit unnerving for Harry. Padma, who had seen many magical phenomena, had no experience with this and the only time she knew magical oaths caused pain was when someone was having their life or magic stripped away. She hid her face in Harry's side, as Harry continued to softly coo at Luna.

The field of magic dissipated with a loud snap as Neville fell bonelessly to the ground. Steelgrip pressed another gem on the table before him and within a minute, there was a staccato knock on the door. Again, Steelgrip barked a sound and the door opened.

This time, two basajaunak wearing blue tunics entered the room. Steelgrip pointed to the wizard on the floor and the two of them knelt down and removed what appeared to be the largest rubies Harry had ever seen from pouches around their waists. They began moving these over Neville's body and speaking in a language which sounded like the warrior dialect, but Harry was unable to understand most of what was said. He recognised some words from the warrior dialect. He heard "blockade" and the past tense verb for "annihilate", and "wizard", but it was the "wizard" which had implications of cowardice and dishonour and not the term they used when speaking to Harry, which seemed to have overtones of saviour and heroic deeds.

While Harry couldn't understand everything they were saying, whatever it was they were saying seemed to be seriously angering Steelgrip.

It is said that the most frightening thing a witch or wizard can see is a happy basajaun. It was never clear if this was said to describe how a basajaun looks when he is smiling or because of the misery a witch or wizard must be feeling to cause a basajaun to smile.

Harry knew this truism was a lie. He knew Steelgrip could be counted as close to a friend as he knew. He knew Steelgrip would never harm him or his girls. The expression on Steelgrip's face just about had Harry pissing himself in fear. Suddenly, Steelgrip spoke, and it was not kindly.

He ranted in the warrior dialect for a full minute before suddenly switching to English. "That brainless, whiskered, four-faced, self-centred, boot-stomping, messianic, self-important, castrated, meddling goat rapist!" the basajaun exclaimed, frothing at mouth.

Even Luna, who had mostly recovered and was only slightly crying was now looking at Steelgrip with the wide eyes of surprise.

"Um. Steelgrip?" Harry cautiously asked.

Steelgrip looked up in anger before realising where he was and who was present.

"In the holy name of the goddess, my sincerest apologies, Harry. Ladies. Please forgive my outburst," Steelgrip said contritely. The last thing he would want to do is alienate this powerful wizard or anyone Harry cared about.

"Of course, you're forgiven, Senior Account Manager Steelgrip. At the very least, you've added to my vocabulary," Luna said, a blush on her cheeks left from her earlier emotional outburst.

Harry turned to Luna, "Are you doing better, My Love?" he asked.

Luna looked at him, her eyes glistening once more and a look of wonder on her face. "Your love?" she asked in a tiny voice.

He leaned his head forward and kissed her gently on the lips. "Yes. My Love," he said and pulled her into another chaste kiss, then looked expectantly at Steelgrip.

Steelgrip waited until he was certain Harry was being attentive again. "From what our healers can discern from their scans, Lord Longbottom had no less than three blocks on his magic. These were cast by a Dumbledore."

"A Dumbledore? You cannot differentiate between Albus and Aberforth?" Harry asked.

"The signatures were damaged. I suspect it was Albus Dumbledore, but it is only a suspicion and insufficient to be taken before the Wizengamot as evidence. Not only were the blocks nine years old, but Lord Longbottom's magic apparently burned through the blocks. Do you realise the repercussions of this?" Steelgrip asked.

"If they had not been removed by the time he was thirteen, his magical core would have been permanently limited after his

thirteenth birthday. At the moment his magic is likely unstable due to the increase in available core size. Is that what you mean?" Harry asked.

Neville began groaning. Steelgrip looked down at him while replying to Harry. "Precisely. With your permission, I would like our healers to scan you as well. The Lady Luna would need to be displaced for a few minutes while the healers perform the scan, however," Steelgrip said with a smile.

"Certainly," Harry said. Luna kissed him on the nose and scooted off his lap. Harry walked over and helped a now awake-but-confused Neville into his chair before sitting down two seats away.

The healers ran their rubies over Harry's body. They ran them over a second time and began mumbling to one another. Then one of them removed a large emerald from his belt pouch and ran it over Harry, holding it near his forehead, while continuing to run the ruby over him. They both looked at Steelgrip and, reminding Harry of Fred and George Weasley, had a whipsawed, one-sided conversation with Steelgrip, whose face became grimmer and grimmer. Harry had no idea what they were saying as they were speaking fast and seemed either excited or agitated.

When the two healers were done, Steelgrip did something Harry had never seen a basajaun do. He put his hands to his face and rested his elbows on the table. Harry suspected this was to prevent a recurrence of foul insults.

After a full minute passed, Steelgrip raised his head and looked at Harry. He vaguely waved the healers off. To Harry's trained ear, Steelgrip sounded weary. "Harry, it is worse than I had imagined. There was some kind of," Steelgrip paused and spoke to the healers a moment, nodded and continued, "soul fragment in your head. The healers tell me it was both in your head and not in your head. It would have been destroyed naturally by your own blood, but someone bound it to you. A Dumbledore. Again, the bindings were too damaged to get a better reading. In fact, there was barely the faintest of echoes of the bindings. Something obliterated them in the last 72 hours. Like Lord Longbottom, you had blocks on your magic. There were seven such blocks in place," Steelgrip explained.

"But that's just not possible. Harry was easily one of the most magically powerful students at Hogwarts last year," Padma said, then looked at Harry, questioningly.

"Well, it does help to explain quite a bit, to me, at least," Harry said thoughtfully, remembering the times Dumbledore had placed the blocks on his magic, now that his magic had undone all of the obliiviations. He turned his attention to Neville, "Neville, how are you feeling?"

Neville was a bit pink when Harry helped him into his chair. He had managed to turn purple and looked like he was ready to explode. "Harry," he said, with no sign of a stutter or fear, "I am sure of one thing. Not even Merlin would be capable of reassembling whomever did this to me. To us. When I get my wand on them, they are going to be eliminated as a threat to us," Neville growled. His eyes began glowing an unnatural blue.

Harry could feel raw waves of incoherent magic pouring from Neville. "Neville, close your eyes, take deep, controlled breaths and then let them out slowly. Do this about ten times or until you don't feel like your head is going to explode. If you don't calm down, you're going to harm your core. With the blocks removed, your magic will respond chaotically and that can cause your core to crack or fracture. Don't get mad. Get even," Harry explained.

Over the next five minutes, Neville followed Harry's instructions and slowly regained a normal complexion.

While Neville was regaining his composure, Steelgrip was reviewing the parchment Harry had handed him.

"There are five additional people of interest I did not mention on that list. Tracey Elisabeth Davis, Daphne Ophelia Greengrass, Astoria Aphrodite Greengrass, Pansy Anastasia Parkinson, and Persephone Hestia Parkinson. Please ensure their fathers are contacted on both matters. Today if possible," Harry said.

Harry sat back down and pulled his chair out and, at Harry's request, the girls rearranged their chairs so they were sitting in a circle.

"Last night I fell asleep before we could talk. I owe all of you a great deal of information. I do not feel comfortable telling you everything,"

he said, seeing Padma was about to interrupt, he held his hand up, "but I am going to tell you whether or not I am comfortable." Padma sat back and smiled.

He looked at each of the girls, but saw no concern or questioning displayed so he pushed onward.

"I am not the same boy I was before I drove my broom into the pitch," Harry said, trying to think of a way to explain who he really was.

The girls just nodded at him.

"No, I mean I really am not the same boy. The Harry Potter you knew ceased to be when I got here," he said.

He looked at Luna as she spoke. "Actually, Harry, while I am sad that he died, you are somewhat mistaken. That Harry died almost two full minutes before you arrived," she said.

He stared at her mutely.

"Didn't you wonder why it hurt so much when you arrived? You didn't think that pain was just because you'd ploughed a furrow into the pitch, did you?" she asked rhetorically. When he didn't say anything, she said, "I will stop talking and let you finish."

He looked at her incredulously for a moment before continuing. "I am also not a twelve-year-old boy," he began.

"That is one thing Luna didn't know. How old are you, Harry? She speculated you were somewhere between fifty and seventy years old," Padma shared, grinning as if she were mad.

"I'm sixty-two," he mumbled, still looking at Luna.

Lavender entered the conversation. "We, that is the four of us girls, specifically talked about this, Harry. Your memories may span some sixty-two years, but you are a twelve-year-old boy. You might have a higher level of emotional control, act more maturely, have a richer vocabulary, and according to Padma, know more about oral manipulation than the average twelve-year-old, but from what

Parvati was saying, you have the body of a twelve-year-old," she said, licking her lips suggestively and winking.

"And from what I could tell from you and Padma this morning, you have all the hormones of a twelve-year-old boy, but better self-control than most. But I find that combination utterly attractive and can't wait to get my turn at testing your self-control," Parvati explained, her hand resting on his inner thigh.

"But doing that would make me just as bad as Lockhart! Worse even! I'm effectively molesting you!" Harry argued, somewhat uncomfortable with Parvati's roaming hand.

"Harry, from what I understand, Lockhart is a rapist. Both of the mind and the body. He would rip my clothes off my body, force me onto the floor, steal my virtue, spit on me, forcibly spread me open, cast a healing spell on my torn innocence, mend my clothes, guilt me into redressing, then rape my mind and do it all over again two weeks later, based on the very limited information you provided us about him last night," Padma said, raising her eyebrow at him, "Is that what you intend to do to us?"

"The difference has nothing to do with age, Harry. Lockhart is old enough to know better and he does it regardless. because who is going to listen to a foreign-born or muggleborn witch, or even a pureblood witch whose Lord or father is dead," Padma continued, talking over Harry every time he attempted to interrupt.

"You, on the other hand, told us how old you are, you saved Luna and me, you care about us, you would support us, you wouldn't force yourself upon us. I was going to give you my virtue. I wanted to feel you inside of me. You and I needed no compulsion charms or unforgivable curses or physical restraint. I wanted it, and you," her expression softened as she looked at him with glistening eyes, "you stopped us. You're the one who maintained a rational mind and didn't get caught up in the moment," she paused, then smiled, "at least not entirely."

"But Padma..." he began, but Parvati interrupted him.

"Harry James Potter, my sister was under no compulsion. I can tell you what she told me in the shower this morning," Parvati looked over at Padma, who simply nodded.



"She wanted you so badly this morning, it took me twenty minutes just to get her relaxed enough to talk about it. After that, she talked for half an hour about you. Padma loves you, Harry. Luna loves you. Hermione told Lavender and I that she loves you. Lavender is completely and utterly infatuated with you and likely wants to love you," Parvati said, noting Lavender was looking down with a shy smile and blushing furiously.

"What about you, Parvati?" Harry whispered, his face displaying the sadness he felt, while Luna, who was feeling his emotions all too acutely had moved to sit in his lap and be held by him.

"Harry, how do you know I am Parvati and not Padma?" she asked.

"What?" Harry asked in surprise.

"It's a legitimate question, Harry. Am I Padma or am I Parvati?" she asked.

"You're Parvati, of course," Harry replied indignantly.

"Tell me how you know," Parvati responded.

"Other than the fact that you're two different girls, Padma likes her tea with a dash of cream and you drink yours fairly drowned in the stuff. You have this cute triangle of freckles beneath your left eye, right there," he gestured, gently touching three faint freckles on the younger twin's left cheek. "You're more demonstrative with your hands and arms, while Padma gestures more with her eyebrows and her shoulders. Padma's breath tastes of cinnamon and honey, while your breath tends to taste of saffron and mint. Padma writes her cursive capitalised S's with this cute little curlicue as a descender, while your cursive lowercase F's have a similar, yet distinctive curlicue on the crossing bar. Padma gets very expressive with her tongue when she is talking, especially if she seems to be genuinely fond of someone, while you lick your lips frequently when you talk and speak with a more breathless voice if you're fond of someone. I suppose I get to see that when you are talking to either me or Lavender, or so I've noticed. Shall I go on?" Harry asked in exasperation.

He could tell he may have overdone it a bit as both Padma and Parvati looked at him with matching stunned expressions on their faces.

Neville, having almost fully recovered from his magical ordeal, laughed a bit. "I think you broke them," he offered.

Padma and Parvati looked at one another. "Do I really lick my lips when I talk to someone I like?" Parvati asked.

"I've never noticed. Do I really taste like cinnamon and honey?" Padma asked.

"I think Parvati's point, Harry," Luna inserted, "is that, unlike most people, you pay attention to them enough to be able to tell them apart."

"Our parents can't tell us apart when we don't want them to," Padma explained. "How long did you know us in your previous life, Harry?" she asked.

"I went to school with both of you for five years, but I can't say we were anything more than acquaintances," he replied.

"Yet you knew all of that about us?" Padma asked searchingly.

Harry blushed, "No. I learned all of that about the two of you in the past two days," he confided.

Padma looked at Harry, her jaw open. Parvati had a near-perfect matching expression.

Lavender squeezed Parvati's hand and looked at Harry, "Did you love both of them from afar before?", she asked, hoping there was some secret romantic connection.

Harry's expression changed to one of profound sadness. "No, Lavender," he said quietly, his voice filled with emotion, "after the final battle with the dark lord, they disappeared. I was never... that is, I really don't think I ever recovered from that fight and then my arranged marriage was upon me and that was nothing like I had been led to believe it would be."

"Who did you marry, Harry?" Lavender asked expectantly.

Harry looked at her and took her free hand, "Lavender, knowing you now, I wish I could say it was you. I would rather not say who it was, though. I certainly didn't love the woman I was married to, but if things go as planned, she will not be the same manipulated, manipulative bi... um," Harry stuttered and blushed once more due to the shocked expressions on the girls' faces, "witch she was the last time."

His voice took on a hollow quality. He looked up from their joined hands, "I made a promise, Lavender. I have to save everyone I can. The cost of my arrival here was so much greater than I had imagined and sometimes the pain I feel at what I did becomes insurmountable."

Luna snuggled into him, leaned her head on his shoulder and kissed his cheek. "Harry, we all know what price you paid, and although we cannot imagine the grief you feel, please hold in your heart the fact that, had you not come, all of us might be dead in just a few years. I hope you find some solace in that," Luna said.

"How did the youngest amongst us become so wise so early?" Harry asked, rubbing his cheek against Luna's.

"Probably something to do with my parents," Luna said mischievously. "But I think we were talking about Parvati's feelings about you, Harry James Potter, Cutest Lord Alive," Luna smiled, flaring her eyes at him. She slid off his lap and sat back in her chair.

Parvati took control of the conversation again. "And if learning all of that about us in two days, which I am completely in awe of, wasn't enough of a reason to be attracted to you, Harry, you care. You don't just say the words. You genuinely take action and carry through with your promises, whether you know you're making them or not. The answer to your question, Harry, is that I am in love with the idea of being in love with you, and in a few days or a few weeks, I expect I will find myself utterly in love with you without realising how it happened. Right now, I know it is a sequence of small events, that when I realise it in the moment, it will seem sudden. I will look back on this conversation and know it was not at all sudden. That you built up the foundation, action by minute action, and that it will

only be the awareness of the love you built that, for me, will make it seem sudden," Parvati explained.

As she had been speaking, she had pushed him back in his chair and straddled his lap. When she was done, she kissed him the way she had watched Padma kiss him earlier that morning. She could feel his reaction to the kiss through his robes. Padma had told her that kissing Harry had been amazing. That description paled in comparison to what Harry was doing to her mouth, lips, and tongue. His hands had slipped inside her cloak, then under her robes and he had begun caressing her bare outer thighs.

Parvati was moaning into the kiss and shuddered in pleasure as she thought of Harry using his tongue to do to her what she had done to Padma earlier that morning, in the shower, to calm Padma down after the spectacle she had witnessed in bed. Parvati collapsed out of the kiss, her head resting on his shoulder. She was trying to control her breathing. Harry could feel her trembling. When Parvati caught her breath again, she gasped, "That was NOT an amazing kiss, Padma."

Padma cocked an eyebrow at her twin, questioning either her sanity or her description.

"That was," she began giggling, "amazing! Dazzling! Stunning!" she exclaimed, a broad smile on her face.

Due to Parvati's giggling, the others could barely understand the word she had used. They did understand it, though, and all the girls began tittering. Harry smiled. Neville smiled and shook his head in amusement.

"Be that as it may," Steelgrip said, directing their attention to a basajaun who'd walked into the room while they had been otherwise distracted, "this is Bloodjaws. He works in Special Accounts as well." The basajaun in question bowed.

Steelgrip explained, "Lord Longbottom, should you wish to perform the Rites of Succession, Bloodjaws will be happy to assist you with it and oversee the execution of your wishes. Should you prefer my hand upon the pulse of House Longbottom, I will be available once we have completed with Lord Potter."

"Th..thank you, Sir," Neville responded nervously. He had never met a polite Gringott's employee before.

Bloodjaw led Neville out of the room.



A~~~~~N

Many PMs and reviews ask where Dumbledore is - he was suspended by the board, but will be returning shortly.

Many PMs and reviews ask about Lockhart's fate. That, too, is coming. A little known fact about dark magical creatures is that they consume their prey live and their digestive systems keep their food alive magically while being digested.

Many PMs and reviews comment about the sexuality of the girls and Harry, claiming them too young to have any interest in sex. I am not certain where these people grew up, or what their experiences were, but my first sexual experience was when I was 12 years old. My husband's first sexual experience, with a girl aged 13 at the time, was when he was 10. There will, however, be no sexual intimacy, except hugs, kisses, and touches, until they are much older. So please untwist your knickers and remember that, when your children are not in your presence, they will do as they please.

I also mentor girls in our hamlet. I explain to them that, while sex may be fun and enjoyable, it comes with great responsibility. While their bodies can be pleased at a much younger age, they should not be performing acts which can lead to pregnancy until they are financially capable of having a child, psychologically mature enough to have a child, and physiologically mature enough to have a child. Sexual intercourse can have adverse health risks, can lead to pregnancy whether or not appropriate protection is used, and can cause their partners to grow significant attachment to them, whether they want that to happen or not. There really is no such thing as "no strings attached" sex.

Even for the well-to-do children, the very last thing they want to do is have children while they are still children themselves.

So please do not, for even a moment, believe I am advocating that young people under the age of 19 have sexual intercourse which can lead to pregnancy. While I am not a die-hard proponent of saving one's self until marriage, I am very much a proponent of the girl being the one to decide when she loses her virginity, presuming, of course, she has had supportive, communicative, honest parents who won't be judgemental when SHE decides it is time.

If you cannot talk to your children honestly and openly about sexuality and their bodies as they are developing, you have absolutely no right or place to rant at me about sexuality.

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Chapter 11 – Out of The Cauldron...
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Steelgrip waited until he heard the door close once again before looking at Harry. "Is this list prioritised, Harry?" Steelgrip asked.

"For the most part. The last page of items I jotted down this morning. The timetable may need to be moved up. The items marked with stars I would like given the highest priority. I distinctly want the parents of those listed in item one protected as soon as possible, the Ministry and existing laws should be ignored, if necessary. The five girls I mentioned should be prioritised as second only to having item one in process," Harry explained.

"We may have to be less than obvious about how we file the appropriate paperwork with the Ministry, but the laws we would use to allow us to do this have been in place for centuries," Steelgrip said.

"Is there anything on the list which you believe will be particularly difficult?" Harry asked.

"I believe some of these items will be challenging, and possibly cost more gold than you make in a month in interest, but I see no reason Gringott's cannot assist you in these matters," Steelgrip said. "There is also the matter of what was required to do as you asked on your prior visit, as well as reviewing the list of families and titles over which you hold sway."

Harry looked on curiously, "I had wondered what you did to get Lord Lovegood and Lord Patil to agree to my requests."

"Simplicity in itself," Steelgrip said with a smile. "We negotiated a mutually-beneficial contract to both men. They both signed the respective agreement and, as your account manager, I signed them for you in your absence, as I was executing your express request. I believe I negotiated the best possible contracts."

Harry was nervous. Parvati had climbed off his lap when Steelgrip had spoken, but she had now reached over Lavender's lap and had

her hand resting on his thigh, if "resting" could be described and gripping it hard enough to cause her fingernails to draw blood through his robes.

"What did you have to do, Steelgrip?" he asked, quickly glancing at Padma, who was pale and seemed on the verge of fainting, then at Parvati, who seemed calm, but he could tell was slightly angry.

"Well, Harry, the only way we could get Lord Lovegood to agree to place Luna in your care was a betrothal agreement. We made concessions on both sides. Lord Lovegood did agree to modify his will to make you his heir with the proviso that Luna's first son is named Lord Lovegood," Steelgrip said, looking at his summary report. He looked up to see an extremely nervous Harry looking at a now-clearly-angry Parvati. Luna, however, had a look of awe and happy surprise on her face.

"And the contract with my father?" Parvati growled out.

"That one was a bit more complex," Steelgrip began. "Since we had negotiated and agreed upon the betrothal terms with Lord Lovegood first, we used that as a basis for the terms of the contract with Lord Patil. The terms are essentially the same, with some modifications. He has modified his will to make you Lord Patil upon his death with the proviso that Padma's first son be named Lord Patil," Steelgrip stopped and looked up at the sound of crying.

Harry looked up when he felt Parvati's hand slip from his lap, only to see her draped over Lavender's shoulder, sobbing. Harry looked at her, devastated.

"Miss Patil, can you please tell me what has you so upset? Surely you knew there was very little chance of your son ever being named Lord Patil," Steelgrip said, looking seriously at the crying girl.

She looked up at the basajaun, tears streaming down her face, "I...I...know, b...but I thought Papa would at least keep us t...t...together," she said, turning once more to Lavender and crying incoherently.

"Oh. Your father was very specific about that, actually," Steelgrip explained. "So much so that he changed his will to name Harry as Lord Baradaran upon his death and that your first born son be



named Lord Baradaran. Surely you didn't think Gringott's would only resolve some of Lord Potter's requests, did you?" Steelgrip asked, his tone sounding as if he felt insulted.

For a moment, Steelgrip had a wet, young witch kissing him on the cheek before he was successful in detaching her from him. She then ran over and draped herself over Harry as she sat sideways on his lap, holding on to him tightly.

"In addition, Lord Patil was quite specific about a number of other items," Steelgrip explained. He now had the full attention of Padma, Parvati, and Harry.

"The first, of course, is that it was both daughters or neither. Both the Lord and Lady Patil were adamant that be a condition of the contracts. Both were also very specific when it came to the dowry and bride price. Lord Patil did ask, and we agreed, that the two transactions could occur simultaneously," Steelgrip smiled, as did Harry.

Dowries came from the bride's family to offset the burden of bringing an unproven witch into an ancient and noble house. A bride price was paid to the bride's family after the first son reached the age of eleven, proving the boy was strong enough to survive childhood. Usually this was some small percentage of the original dowry.

Steelgrip continued, expecting the Patil girls' reaction was going to be epic and watched for it. "Lord Patil demanded, and we agreed on your behalf, that in order to keep his eldest daughter within the means she has come to expect, the dowry for Padma would be eight hundred thousand galleons," Steelgrip watched as all four girls' eyes grew wide. "He then demanded, and we agreed on your behalf, that in order to keep his youngest daughter, Parvati, within the means she has come to expect, her dowry would also be eight hundred thousand galleons." All thoughts of tears were gone from Parvati's face. Steelgrip liked the fact that they were both now truly in shock.

"The bride price Lord Patil demanded for Padma, to which we agreed on your behalf, as Padma is an exceptionally beautiful, intelligent, talented, and unspoiled girl, whose equal exists nowhere else, and the children she would bear you would obviously be healthy and intelligent, was eight hundred thousand galleons. The bride price Lord Patil demanded for Parvati, to which we agreed on

your behalf, as Parvati is an exceptionally beautiful, artistic, intelligent, talented, and unspoiled girl, whose equal exists nowhere else, and the children she would bear you would obviously be healthy and intelligent, was eight hundred thousand galleons.

Since Lord Potter wanted to ensure both of these girls were safe and under his control rather than under the control of the Ministry or others, a wedding in absentia was performed. Additionally, while the dowry and the bride price were of equal amounts and both clients are well-known to us, we accepted the transaction from Lord Patil's vaults while at the same time funding a zero percent interest loan from Lord Potter's vaults. We also placed the same amount into an escrow account so that Lord Potter can pay the bride price for each of his brides when their first-born sons reach eleven-years-old."

Padma and Parvati were still looking at Steelgrip in open-mouthed shock.

"Any particular reason that amount was chosen, Steelgrip?" Harry asked.

Steelgrip smiled. Yes, he loved working with intelligent clients. "Yes, Harry. Lord Patil insisted House Potter pay for the research, but since House Potter has done so much business with us," Steelgrip said, gesturing with the parchment, "the cost was inconsequential."

"Before these betrothals, the highest dowry ever paid by a father was ten thousand galleons by one Lord Motts in 1843. In that betrothal contract, the stated reason was that his daughter was so naturally disfigured that the only way to see her married to an heir of another family with the same social status as the Motts family was to pay for the privilege," Steelgrip explained.

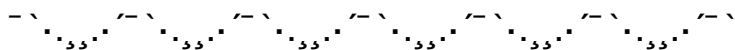
"Since even my eyes could see how lovely these two young ladies are," the basajaun said, causing both girls to smile shyly, "that was not a factor. Regardless, it is expected by both Lord Patil and Gringott's that this new record will not be exceeded until Harry's wives begin having daughters."

"What dowry and bride price did my father agree to, Sir?" Luna asked.

Steelgrip turned his attention to the youngest girl. "Lady Potter, your father asked if there had been any other betrothal contracts, and if so, what terms were specified in them. After Lord Patil signed his contracts, we explained to your father, who had still not made a decision in that aspect, the terms agreed to with Lord Patil. Your father took an hour to formulate his demands, and while his requirements were simpler, it may surprise you that Gringott's considered the value of the transaction to be equal to, if not higher than, the price of either of the Patil girls. That his demands also, in Gringott's opinion, helped our client with one of the items of interest on his list, was all the better."

All eyes were on Steelgrip in anticipation.

"Lord Lovegood, as a dowry, presents to House Potter, a forty-nine percent ownership in Lovegood Publishing, publisher of 'The Quibbler', and Truth Be Told Enterprises, contractual printer for all Ministry forms, documents, as well as several periodicals. He also agreed to, and has already executed, a change in his will naming Harry as Lord Lovegood upon his death with the proviso that Luna's first son be named Lord Lovegood, and further that Luna's first son be named Obediah James Lovegood-Potter, after his maternal grandfathers. As a bride price, Lord Lovegood simply wants to be involved in the lives of Harry, his wives and their descendants. He was also pleased when we informed him of the bond yesterday," Steelgrip explained.



While Lavender was very happy for her friend, it really was all she could do to keep from crying herself. She had tuned out the near-monotone discussion with Steelgrip, lost in her own thoughts. Marrying Harry would have been her dreams come true, but she knew her parents would never agree to betroth her into a plural marriage. Lavender thought it would only ever be a dream. She thought about how nice it had been going to sleep the previous evening, then to awaken with a beautiful blonde naked little witch straddled atop her. At breakfast, Parvati had whispered to her about the events she had witnessed between Padma and Harry. Lavender already knew a number of older boys looked at her as little more than a piece of meat, or quite possibly a toy.

She suddenly realised everyone in the room was staring at her. "I'm sorry. I was wool-gathering. What did I miss?"

Harry stood, then knelt in front of her, reaching up and wiping away the tears running down her cheeks. She only then realised she had been crying.

"Are you unhappy about this, Lavender?" Harry asked softly, cupping her cheek with his hand.

She looked from him up to Parvati, who had moved to the other side of Lavender. "I am very happy for Padma and Parvati." Her voice broke on the last syllable and she buried her face in her hands, pushing Harry's hand out of the way.

Parvati, who knew Lavender better than any of them, pulled the older blonde girl to her and held her while she cried. When her shoulders had slowed in their rolling from her sobbing respiration, Parvati asked, "You silly, silly, silly girl. Did you not hear a thing Steelgrip just said? Did you not hear his question?"

Lavender sat up, then looked at the ceiling as she could not seem to stop crying. "I'm...my apologies, Mr. Steelgrip, Sir. Could you repeat your question?"

The basajaun in question, handed Harry a silk handkerchief, who proceeded to draw Lavender's attention back down to him as he used the handkerchief to gently wipe the tears from her face.

"I had been explaining the meeting I had just this morning with Lord Brown and your parents. I then asked you if you were acceptable to the agreement, as Harry has expressed he does not wish to force this type of agreement on anyone," Steelgrip explained.

"What type of agreement?" Lavender asked, successful, finally, in her attempt to control her tears. Harry was thankful for the slight cheering charm cast on the handkerchief.

"A betrothal agreement with Lord Potter, Miss Brown," Steelgrip said slowly, as he believed the girl's emotional state was still uncertain.

"My parents would never agree to a betrothal agreement to Harry. They detest plural marriages, believing them to be disgusting and hateful. They think the women are, at best, exploited and, at worst, victims of serial rape. I think their only experience with them is from the family histories discussing other families' practices," she said, as she stared off into the distance and remembered her mother's rant about one of her cousins' second marriage to two not-yet graduated witches fifty years his junior.

She then looked down at Harry, who still knelt before her chair. "If they knew Harry, though, and if all plural marriages had as honourable a centre as Harry, they would know the wonders such unions can be," she said dreamily. She closed her eyes and felt the warmth and care he conveyed by simply touching her cheek and making her the centre of his attention, even if only for a few short minutes.

"Your parents, reluctantly I should add, agreed to sign a betrothal agreement for you and Lord Potter," Steelgrip said, "with several conditions and restrictions. Would you like to me to detail them again?"

Lavender opened her eyes and looked at Steelgrip. He was not smiling. Which meant that he had not been joking or merely trying to make her feel better. She looked down at Harry, who still looked up at her with concern. She looked up to Steelgrip again, trying not to get her hopes up, "Yes, please, Sir."

Steelgrip focused his attention on Harry for a moment, a true smile on his face. "Lord Potter, you and your ilk are going to ruin me as a Gringott's manager," the humour evident in his voice.

Harry did not stop looking at Lavender, but asked, "How is that, Steelgrip?"

The basajaun laughed a moment, "All of you saying 'please' and 'thank you' and referring to me as 'sir'. Why, it's almost as if you think of me as an equal, and I have not had the pleasure of that experience since your father was my client."

"Well, I would suggest you get used to it, Steelgrip, as I do see you as at least my equal. I am certain my friend, Neville Longbottom sees you as his equal. No one over whom I hold dominion will ever

see a basajaun as anything less than a sentient being. Should they do so, I will properly chastise then educate them as to their place in the world," Harry said, taking hold of Lavender's hand with his free hand, while gently stroking her face.

"Regardless, Miss Brown, the conditions and restrictions Lord Paulus was amenable to, as requested, or if you prefer, demanded, by your parents, or to be more accurate, your mother, are as follows," Steelgrip said.

He then began reading from a piece of parchment, "You are to be treated fairly and equitably as all of your co-wives, meaning all of these conditions and restrictions apply to them as well."

"No force, potions, or magic may ever be used against you by Lord Potter or any of his other wives to coerce or compel you to consummate with Lord Potter."

"Once the union is joined, you, and only you, have the option to end the marriage through divorce. Neither Lord Potter nor his other wives are permitted to use potions or magic in an effort to end your marriage. This includes the use of poison."

"You are to be allowed to continue your education and, at your choosing, extend your education beyond Hogwarts and to have, should you choose to have one, a career outside of the duties of a wife."

"You are not permitted to conceive your first child before you have attained the age of nineteen years, as verified by a recognised healer. I should point out your father wanted to put a restriction that you not consummate your marriage before your twenty-fifth birthday, but Lord Brown reminded both your father and mother that they consummated their relationship when he was fifteen and she was fourteen and were married a month later when it was discovered she was pregnant with you," Steelgrip mused, then continued reading.

"Your children are to be raised with the attention of both their father, mother, and all other adults deemed to be appropriately involved in the rearing of the child or children."

"All children of appropriate age will be sent to an appropriate school or taught at home, so they may best use their magic and better understand their place in society and the world at large."

"Neither Lord Potter nor any of his other wives is permitted to intentionally cause you or your children physical, emotional, mental, or magical harm."

"There is to be no dowry, as your parents felt that, based on common belief, Lord Potter has the means to provide a proper home life for you without additional funding. Should this not be the case, Lord Brown has indicated he would be more than willing to set aside an appropriate amount to purchase or build a manor for Lord Potter and his wives. They did concede the two previously-executed betrothal agreements superseded this agreement."

"With regard to bride price, your parents' opinion was that no amount of money could ever buy your affection or the love of a child, and their involvement in your life and the lives of your children would be all they would ask of Lord Potter."

Steelgrip looked up from the parchment, and noticed Harry was now sitting in a chair with Lavender sitting sideways on his lap. Parvati had her arms around Lavender's waist. Padma was cuddled into Harry's other side and held one of Lavender's hands while Luna had Padma sandwiched in between her and Harry and was holding Lavender's other hand.

"I presume these terms are acceptable to you, Miss Brown?" Steelgrip asked, but already knowing the answer.

With happy tears escaping from her eyes, Lavender nodded, then tenderly kissed Harry again. "It's like a dream come true," she whispered, before resting her head against Harry's.

"Now we should likely talk about Lady Hermione Potter's parents," Steelgrip said, causing Harry to feel truly concerned about his plans, and not just a little afraid about a pair of thirty-five-year-old dentists.

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-The previous afternoon-

Daniel and Emma Granger had just been finishing up with the last of their paperwork when their receptionist, Margaret, popped her head into their mutual office.

"There's a rather smartly-dressed solicitor-type sitting in the waiting room. He said he needed to speak with both of you about Hermione," she'd said.

"How smartly-dressed?" Dan asked.

"Likely Savile Row. Best guess, Huntsman, and not off the rack," Margaret said, handing Emma the man's calling card.

Emma examined the card. The first thing that caught her attention was that the card was not made from paper. It was metal. And heavy. It had a rainbow of colour, which went from black to a deep blue and looked natural. It read, "Michael Smith-Barr, Executive Accounts, Barclays Bank Plc, London" in gold letters. She handed the card to Dan.

"And he wants to talk about Hermione?" Emma asked.

"No. He said he NEEDED to speak with you about Hermione. He very much emphasised the 'needed' part," Margaret replied.

"Maggie, take Mr. Smith-Barr to consultation room three and let him know Emma and I will join him in just a moment," Dan said, looking at the card once more. "Iridium," he thought, "why would they use iridium for a business card? Likely the lettering is really gold then." Margaret left to escort the man to the largest consultation room the office had.

Dan could sense Emma's concern, not that he wasn't concerned himself. They did question the reasons their bank had someone come all the way from London to talk to them about Hermione. "Stiff upper lip, Em. Let's see what he has to say before we begin worrying too much," Dan said with false bravado, though Emma could not sense his bluff. She was still too worried about Hermione to determine if Dan was really this collected.

The two of them, still in their whites, walked into the room. The man sitting there looked as if he was young enough to not have entered university yet. He short-cropped hair, serious demeanour and the

way he carried himself reminded Dan of his years with Four Two Commando. "Mr. Smith-Barr, this is my wife Emma and I am Daniel Granger. I understand you wished to speak with us about our daughter," Dan said, reaching out and shaking the man's hand.

Margaret walked in with a tea service and then left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Mr. Granger. Mrs. Granger. This may seem unusual, and for Barclays, it is. I do need to speak to you about Hermione," Michael explained as Dan and Emma were sitting. "I was sent here by my employer to inform you that yesterday, Hermione was injured and is currently in the Infirmary at her school."

"What are you talking about?" Dan growled, knowing full well that no one from a bank was going to know about Hogwarts, much less the specific goings-on there.

Michael reached up the sleeve of his suit jacket slowly and removed his wand from its holster. He then transfigured his empty tea cup into a mouse and then returned it to its natural form. "Barclays Bank is the non-magical extension of Gringott's Wizarding Bank. One of our major account holders discovered your daughter, Hermione Jane, who attends Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in her second year, was magically petrified by unknown means. Our client was certain the school had not informed you, the school likely never would inform you, and our client respected your position as parents so much that he insisted you be informed immediately."

"I want to see her," Emma said, her voice trembling. She wrapped herself around Dan's arm, needing his strength to keep her from losing her mind from grief. "I should have never let her go there!" she cried out in her mind.

"I'm afraid that, at this time, it simply isn't possible. Non-magical parents cannot see, much less visit the school. It is our understanding the school has acquired the necessary botanical ingredients to release her from the petrification, but it will be at least another two weeks before those ingredients are ready to harvest," Michael said, regurgitating from memory the information he had been told he was allowed to share with these two.

"You came all the way from London to tell us Hermione has been injured and that we cannot see her?" Dan asked, the menace clear in his tone.

"No sir. The client who informed us of this situation was so incensed with the school's dismissive attitude that, at his own cost, he provided additional security for your daughter and the other six victims who are petrified. At his request, we are notifying the non-magical parents of all of the victims," Michael explained.

"So all of the students - I am presuming the victims are all students - are of non-magical parents?" Dan asked, trying to keep the edge of anger out of his voice. "No point in shooting, or shouting at, the messenger, after all," he thought to himself.

"No, Mr. Granger. One of the children is a member of an ancient and noble house. I am also to extend an invitation to bring Hermione home the Friday after she is released from the school Infirmary to spend the weekend with you, if you would like. Due to legal restrictions she will have to return Sunday evening," Michael said.

Emma looked at Dan. Dan nodded, "We would very much like Hermione to spend the weekend with us once she has recovered."

"There is one other matter I have been instructed to discuss with you. It is in regards to your daughter's magical guardianship. At present, her de facto magical guardian is Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. Considering Mr. Dumbledore's poor record at keeping your daughter safe, I have been authorised to provide you another choice for her magical guardian," the young man explained.

"How is it we were not given a choice before?" Emma asked.

Michael had been told to be as honest as possible with these two as they could somehow use some muggle way of detecting falsehoods. "It is pure speculation on my part, but I would presume it was because whomever came from the school to talk to you about the world of magic didn't tell you the choice was yours to make, and if you made no choice, the school would choose one for you. If asked afterwards, they would simply say you had not read the provided orientation materials."

"What orientation materials?" Emma asked, her concern now changing to anger at being kept ignorant of something as important as this.

Michael was surprised, "You were provided with a package of books and pamphlets concerning your daughter's introduction to Magical Britain, were you not?" he asked.

"No, we were not," Emma answered hotly.

Michael made a note on the tablet in front of him.

"Were you aware Hermione was attacked by a troll her first year?" Michael asked.

"Describe a troll, please?" Dan asked, massaging his right forearm to release the tension of wanting to throttle someone.

"A European mountain troll is three to four metres in height, weighs twelve hundred kilograms, carries a stout club weighing two to three hundred kilograms, has an intelligence level equivalent to someone with an intelligence quotient of fifty, and smells like the wrong end of a toffer's scow," he explained.

"What happened?" Dan asked. Emma was gripping his arm so hard her knuckles were white.

Michael removed a folder from his briefcase. "I cannot leave this with you, but I can allow you to read this. In summary, Hermione had been having a rough go of school due to some other students verbally bullying her. After her morning class, one of her classmates said something to set her off and she went into the girls' loo to have a good cry. She was in the loo from approximately ten in the morning until the end of dinner at eight in the evening."

"Did none of the professors notice her missing?" Emma asked incredulously.

"Apparently not. To continue, a professor let the troll in question into the school as a diversion from his attempts to steal an object. The troll wandered into the loo and proceeded to attempt to kill Hermione."

"Another student, who is a friend of Hermione's, knew she was possibly in danger and where she was and went to warn her. When he found her, the troll was apparently about to kill her. He jumped on the troll's back and managed to subdue it. He then took hold of your daughter, who was somewhat hysterical at the time, and led her to safety. It should be noted he was chastised by the headmaster and the deputy headmistress for saving Hermione's life rather than following the school's rules," Michael finished.

"And we're only just now finding out about this?" Dan growled again. He knew it wasn't Michael's fault, but it was difficult to maintain an even temper when his Little Kitten's life was on the line.

"Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I have no idea how you're feeling right now, but if my daughter, who is seven at the moment, were involved in an incident such as this one and the school didn't even have the decency to tell me about it, I would be pushing the Wizengamot, the magical version of the House of Lords, to put these administrators in prison," Michael said. He did not tell them that the likelihood of the Wizengamot sending Albus Dumbledore to prison was the same probability of his own daughter becoming queen of the world one day.

"What of the teacher who let that monster into the school?" Emma asked in tears of anger and frustration.

Michael smiled grimly, having himself watched the pensieve memory of that encounter. "Your daughter's friend, the one who rescued her from the troll, caught up with him attempting to steal the object and killed him," he said plainly.

"Killed him?" Dan asked. "Was it intentional?"

"The professor verbally threatened Hermione's safety then physically attacked her friend. He indicated, in an after-incident interview," which Michael knew had been pieced together from memory fragments associated with the 'Bathroom Troll Incident' as Gringott's referred to it, "indicated he believed the professor was attempting to use lethal force against him and he had no recourse but to take the man's life," Michael replied.

Dan didn't know whether his blood was boiling because of the dangers Hermione had been put through due to trolls and goodness

knows what else, or her associating with a boy old enough to kill another human being and this troll thing. Michael slid the folder across the table so it lay in front of Dan.

He opened it. The first thing he saw was a moving picture of Hermione, a smile on her face, holding a short stack of books to her chest with one arm and waving to the camera with the other.

He took it out of the folder and set it off to the left.

The next picture in the stack caused his hand to freeze. It was a composite drawing.

A smaller, full-body moving picture of Hermione was standing on the left side of the drawing. Next to her was an artist's depiction, or so he hoped, of a "troll club" which was twice her height and as big around as her shoulders at the wide end and as big around as her thigh at the handle. Next to the club was a depiction of a troll. The troll was easily three and a half times her height. It outweighed an elephant. It had human characteristics, but this was clearly the rugby player of the magical world.

Emma took this picture from him and stared at it a few moments before turning it face down on the table.

The next picture caused Dan's blood to boil anew. "This must be Hermione's friend," he thought. The caption on the picture read, "Quirinus Quirrell". "How old is this boy? He looks a bit too old to be at Hogwarts, much less associating with my daughter," Dan said.

Michael laughed, causing both Dan and Emma to glare at him. He sobered immediately then explained, "My apologies. But in context, that was amusing. This is a picture of the professor who allowed the troll to enter the school."

Dan sighed in relief, then put the picture face down over the troll picture.

The next picture was another moving picture. It showed Hermione with her arm around the shoulders of a smaller, bespectacled boy with messy black hair. Hermione then moved closer and kissed the boy on the cheek. The boy was both clearly embarrassed, but also clearly enjoyed the affection being shown to him based on the smile

that illuminated his face as he looked away from Hermione and blushed.

"I'd bet that is the boy Hermione is always writing about in her letters; Harry Potter," Emma said, smiling at the scene of two innocent children sharing a moment of childhood tenderness.

"Yes, but why would it be included with all of this?" Dan asked, gesturing to the contents of the folder.

"Mr. Granger, Mr. Potter is the friend of Hermione's that subdued the troll and killed the professor," Michael said, and watching the growing disbelief on Dan's face as Dan looked up at him, he continued. "I know, Mr. Granger. I would not believe it myself were it not for the fact I know he actually did the things described in that report. In the after-incident interview, it was clear from what was and was not said, Mr. Potter would do whatever was needed to keep Hermione safe. Personally, I believe him."

Dan was an excellent judge of people. Watching this man's face, Dan knew he believed he spoke the truth. To consider a boy who, based on his height, was younger than Hermione would go to the extreme of killing another human being to keep his daughter safe... "Well, at least the boy has his priorities right," Dan thought, a smile creeping into the corners of his mouth.

Emma took the pictures and stacked them back into the folder and closed it.

"Do we know this guardian?" she asked.

"He actually wished to meet with you and will be the one bringing Hermione home to visit, if that is acceptable. It is actually because of him that this exception is being made," Michael said.

"Can we change it at a later time if we choose to?" Dan asked.

"All it requires is contacting either Gringott's or the Ministry of Magic and the proper forms. I would recommend that, should you choose to change her guardian at a later date, you do it through Gringott's as the Ministry is not known for being friendly or helpful to non-magical parents of magical children," Michael explained.

Emma took the stack of papers and began reading through them. Some of the language was archaic, and some of it made little sense in the context of Hermione, but signing this gave her control over who was responsible for Hermione and that was really what she cared about. She took the offered pen and signed it. She then passed the document over to Dan.

Dan trusted Emma to have read through the contract and would not have signed it herself if there were any issues with it. He had a head for planning and execution. He'd always hated the administrative trivia that went along with procurement and payroll. He, too, took the pen and signed it.

Both the signatures and the agreement itself flashed gold and then disappeared.

In surprise, Emma yelped and Dan shouted, "What the...!"

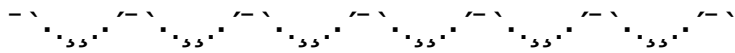
"It is a magical contract. The flash of magic was it being executed and filed," Michael said, taking the 'Troll in the Loo' file and placing it back within his case.

"Don't we get a copy?" Emma asked expectantly.

"Under current Ministry law, copies of magical contracts are not allowed to be left with non-magical parents. The next time you are in Gringott's, however, they will be more than happy to provide you with a copy to read while you are within the bank," the young man said.

Emma and Dan looked at one another. Dan stood. "Thank you, Mr. Smith-Barr. I do believe we will do as you suggest. We look forward to seeing our daughter shortly. It has, however, been a long day, and my wife and I are, as you can imagine, a bit overwhelmed and troubled by the information you have shared with us." Dan extended his hand.

Michael felt that, on some level, he had failed in his assignment. He put his notepad into his case, closed it, shut the hasps, then stood and took Dan's hand. "Thank you for your time today, Mr. Granger," he then turned and bowed to Emma, "Mrs. Granger. I will see myself out," he said and left the room.



"...and as Harry is now Hermione's magical guardian, following Harry's instructions with some initiative, a betrothal agreement was written and executed between Harry James Potter, as Hermione Jane Granger's magical guardian, and the House of Potter. Upon applying the seal of House Potter, since a bond was already in place between the two of them, the betrothal agreement came into effect immediately," Steelgrip explained.

He then looked at Harry, who had a concerned expression on his face. "Harry, I know that look on wizards. This way, with the recent 'Muggleborn Protection Act' you have control over the safety of Hermione, her parents, and any living, non-magical relations. Nothing says you have to tell her parents the two of you are married before they, themselves become comfortable with the idea. I certainly wouldn't tell a two-metre tall human warrior that his one and only girl child was now, essentially, your plaything," Steelgrip amended his comment, "not that you would ever consider Hermione as such, but it is the intent of most betrothal agreements these days."

A knock at the door held any response. Steelgrip barked, "Enter," in the warrior dialect. A witch wearing the pale blue frock of the Gringott's potions guild entered and set a potion in front of Harry before bowing to Steelgrip and leaving again.

"This is your requested contraception potion, Harry. It will maintain male sterility beginning twelve hours after you drink it for a period of seventy-two months unless the counter-potion is taken. I'm told by other human males who drink it that it is one of the few potions they've ever imbibed which actually tasted good," Steelgrip said, gesturing towards the still-steaming flask, not mentioning what the same men had to say about the physical sensations caused by drinking the potion.

Harry had taken one of these before fourth year, in the event someone managed to slip him a lust potion. He had purchased it from an apothecary in Knockturn Alley via Dobby. He had taken the counter-potion the morning of his wedding to Ginny. This time, he didn't plan to take the counter-potion until Hermione's nineteenth birthday.

Harry picked up the flask, looked to his left to Lavender and Parvati, who both smiled and nodded. He then looked to his right to Padma and Luna, who also smiled in encouragement. He put the flask to his lips and slowly drank from it.

At first, the flavour of warm hot fudge and cake washed over his tongue. Halfway through the flask, the flavour changed to vanilla sorbet with a hint of strawberries. It was warm in his mouth, but as it drained into his stomach, he felt an almost-comforting coolness radiate through him. Once the flask was drained, he set it down, and clenched his fists, knowing what was about to come.

Suddenly, though expected, his scrotum felt as if it was embedded in a block of ice. The cold caused a painful sensation a man was never entirely able to prepare for. It felt as if someone was slowly crushing his testicles in an icy grip, using hands projecting thousands of needles. Sweat broke out on his forehead and tears of nausea and pain came unbidden to his eyes. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. The sensations consumed him, filling his every sense of being. Ice cold fire filled his groin, pulsing with an intense pain that was his every focus. Unending, blinding, oh-so-cold, puncturing, needling, shredding pain.

Just as suddenly, the sensation of pain and cold disappeared.

He trembled from the aftermath of the adrenaline and endorphins. It took all his self-control to not regurgitate.

Finally he took a deep breath and sat back in his chair, not consciously realising his knees and forehead had been trying to meet through the table.

Padma had a hand on his chest and another on the back of his head. "Harry?" she asked. His eyes remained closed and he was breathing rapidly.

Parvati had his hand in hers and was massaging his forearm. "Harry?" she asked. Still no response, other than a discernible slowing and deepening of his breathing.

Lavender stood and moved behind Harry and began rubbing his temples and head.

It was Luna who finally managed to get a response from him, using a rather unconventional method. She had not felt the pain, but knew Harry must have somehow pinched off the bond as it was obvious he had been hurting and that there was nothing she could do in the moment to ease the discomfort. She had then felt numbness and a numbing cold from him, as if the pain from the potion had been so intense, normal stimulation, by comparison, was barely a breeze blowing compared to a hurricane.

She took hold of his hand, put her lips to his ear and whispered, "Harry, my beloved husband, open your eyes and tell me how much you love me."

Harry opened his eyes wide, turned to face Luna and kissed her. His feelings for her in that moment had no tangible sexual component. He was simply amazed, once again, that it had been Luna's gift that had allowed him to even be here and the love he had for her would never be small enough to be thought of on normal human scales.

The kiss wasn't chaste, but neither was it a hormone-driven kiss of hunger, their tongues performing the tango with one another. Their lips were parted and their tongues were waltzing, slowly, lovingly, embracing one another while their minds and their magics mingled with one another.

Luna was suddenly surrounded by Harry's love for her as their lips touched. She had been hugged by her father and her mother and that had been wonderful. She had been hugged by Padma, Parvati, and Lavender and that had been unexpectedly better.

Since Luna had actually managed to get Harry to respond, the other girls had backed away from them so Harry could have free use of his arms. The girls watched as Luna was not pulled or tugged, but floated into Harry's lap. He wrapped his arms around her, not holding her there, but simply providing her a physical expression of his feelings for her.

Luna felt as if she was being hugged everywhere at once. She was overwhelmed that someone she'd only met yesterday, even with his previous experience with another version of her, could feel this way about her.

Her entire world - her entire being - existed in this moment and this eternity for only one thing. To receive and reciprocate this love.

Lavender and Parvati gasped and then sighed as a golden orb of magic formed around Harry and Luna.

Padma, however, knew what she was witnessing. It was something her mother's mother's father had told her and Parvati stories about when they were much younger.

-o-o-

Nanaji was one of the few magicals at the time who remained submersed in the Hindi traditions and was determined his sons, daughters and their children would at least learn, if not practice, these same traditions, as he felt magic was a blessing from Vishnu.

It was one of the reasons Padma had felt so close to her great grandfather. Even at the age of six, she had a logical mind. And he had always made time for her and explained things and answered all of her questions, no matter the level of minutia. Many of the teachings made sense to her. The lesson concerning the energy she was witnessing at the moment had been one she had hoped to be blessed with experiencing herself one day.

He had been talking about the levels of love.

There was the love a child had for a parent or grandparent. The love a person has for an animal. He went on to describe dozens of types of love, their aspects, their importance, their duration. With all of these descriptions, Padma had been given a sense that all love was transitory.

Temporary.

Limited.

Why then should she waste any precious time in this life trying to find love.

Parvati, since the time of Nanaji's talk, before Padma had begun asking her questions, had run off with an odd, in Padma's perspective, view of love and how versatile and romantic it was.

When Padma had expressed her position about love to Nanaji, he listened politely and patiently, as he always did when she spoke to him or asked him questions.

When she was done, he responded to her.

"My child," he had said, "you are the product on an infinite amount of love. Your parents loved one another to bring you into this world, and they love you. Their parents loved one another, and they brought your parents into this world, and they loved them. For every step in this sequence, twice as many people had to be so full of love that they coupled to bring children into the world and love them. Do you not also wish to some day have children?" he asked calmly.

She had looked over at her twin, who was running through the poppy fields gathering flowers, not a care in the world because everyone loved her, and by extension, loved Padma, or that is what she believed.

She had nodded at Nanaji.

"Then let me tell you of the love that is. It is, I should warn you, very rare. It is a love that has no limits. No borders. No conditions. If a man loved a woman like this, even Brahma would call attention to it because this man and this woman would have Vishnu within them, loving one another for the good of the other and of all others. He would love the woman and the love would just be. And it would remain until the great circle had been completed, which is to say it would never end."

"While it is unlikely we will have enough time in this life to attain this level of love, we must strive to attain it, for love is truly the only reason we are here," he had explained.

He had looked off into the distance and had pulled her onto his lap, something he had never done before, and kissed her on her forehead. "I hope you find this love, Child," he'd said.

-o-o-

She was mesmerized by the golden orb surrounding Harry and Luna. This was a love that transcended time, space, and magic. This was

the love she wanted to experience. This was the love she wanted for herself. But she was not going to take it away from Luna if she could not attain it herself.

As their lips parted, the golden glow faded.

Padma smiled when she heard Luna say, "That was nice, Husband."

"Steelgrip, sir, are there any limitations on when we can marry Harry?" Parvati asked, still staring at Luna and Harry.

Steelgrip was somewhat recovering from witnessing the magical component of Harry's and Luna's kiss, so took a moment to respond. "Miss Patil, none of the betrothal agreements have any lower limits regarding when you may be married, though all of you have had marriages in absentia to Harry and are legally his wives, marriage ceremonies may occur at any time. As Harry is older than eleven and has claimed Lordship of House Potter, he is considered an adult. All you ladies would need to do is sign your betrothal agreements and you would be officially married in the eyes of the Ministry and Gringott's, as the Lord of your house has already signed them and the representative of House Potter has already signed them."

Harry looked up at this. "Ladies, I did have a specific order in mind," he said.

Padma decided this was her opportunity to enter the conversation. "Excuse me, Harry. Does your order differ from Hermione, Luna, myself, Parvati, and Lavender?" she asked.

"Not as such..." he began, but was cut off by the older twin.

"Did you go to all of this trouble with betrothal agreements, just to hold them over our heads?" she asked, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice, but was not entirely successful.

Tears slowly trickled from Parvati's eyes. "Don't you want us?" she asked, clearly upset.

Lavender was about to speak, also clearly showing signs of distress, but Harry cut off all further discussion on the topic.

"Wait! Just stop! Yes, Padma, that is the order. Yes, Parvati, I do want you safe and happy. Lavender, I apologise for cutting you off, but you need to listen to me. I do have reasons for this. Entirely emotional ones, but they are reasons nonetheless," Harry said.

"Harry," Padma began, but he held his hand up. She continued regardless. "No, listen to me first, My Betrothed." It was her best emotional salvo. "You are already magically and legally married to Hermione and Luna. You are already somewhat married to us three. You may want to have individual celebratory weddings or blessing for the public, and I absolutely want to watch as you stare in awe as Hermione is walked down the aisle by her father."

She could see this argument was causing his resolve to begin crumbling, so she continued.

"What reasons could you possibly have for not wanting us to share this love," she said, gesturing to Luna sitting on Harry's lap, "with us?"

She felt her eyes burning as the tears came unbidden, "I want to feel that love, Harry. I want to know what it's like to have your arms wrapped around me and know, not just hope, you love me. I want to f...", her voice broke.

She looked up at the ceiling a moment, then closed her eyes, turned away and continued, "feel your love for me. I want you to feel everything I feel. Luna told us about how she can feel what you're feeling and that you can feel what she is feeling. I want that. But only if you want it, too," she said. She stood and rushed out of the room. She couldn't face him if he didn't really want her.

Parvati had listened to her sister speak, but also heard and watched the nuances of twin-speak. Padma didn't want that just for her. She wanted it for all of Harry's wives. Padma had told her that she didn't think it would stop with just the six of them, either.

Parvati decided to present a unified face, burst into tears, and ran from the room.

Lavender could not believe what had just happened. Padma was not the girly, gushy type. Padma was the logical, reasoned one of the three of them, yet she had just fled the room in hysterics. Parvati

had then, she could tell, decided to follow suit. It was left up to Lavender to be the logical one here, but she was having difficulties not crying herself.

"I believe I need to go check on my two friends," she said, as she began crying herself.

Harry watched in utter shock as the three girls left. He might be an adult in his mind, but he never really did have a complete grasp of the female emotional mind. He was staring at the door when he felt his chin pulled up to face two grey eyes.

"Harry. They're thirteen years old. They would have been upset even if they were thirty. They're all feeling like you're rejecting them. I know you aren't, but they don't have your life experience or your iron will. What they do have is love for you and for one another. Padma and Parvati had always feared they would have separate husbands. That is something they never wanted. Lavender was so excited about getting a betrothal contract too. They feel like you're holding it over their heads, like a carrot in front of a horse," Luna explained.

"That's not it, Luna. I..." Harry began explaining, but Luna placed a finger to his lips.

"Harry, you have three extremely upset girls standing outside the door and all they want to do is sign their names on documents and know you want them. Them signing those also provides them additional protections. I know you want them protected. The full details of it, I haven't shared. The future is too unpredictable when I share that with them," she explained.

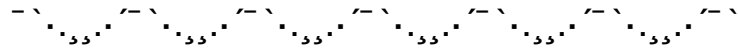
"What should I do?" Harry asked, truly seeking her opinion.

Luna's eyes turned glassy for a moment, her voice changing, "Without them, all is lost," she said, then relaxed against him a moment.

She slid off his lap. "Go to them and tell them you love them. Let them sign the contracts with the knowledge that that is what you want. You just need to be completely honest with them as to why you wanted to wait, you silly, silly man," Luna said, then kissed him on the nose.

Harry stood and kissed Luna on the forehead. "What would I do without you?" he asked, then headed to the door, and the girls beyond.

She whispered, too softly for him to hear, "I never want to find out the answer to that."



A~~~~~N

This is a short chapter. I am leaving for a trip in just a few short hours that will prevent me from having much in the way of time to publish for two to four weeks. There is some uncertainty as to when I will be able to get back to these, and I hope the person providing me with the time estimate was horrifically pessimistic, as I had planned on providing at least 7,000 words a week published for this story and SLY2. I hope you enjoy this addition.

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Chapter 12 – ...And Into The Fire

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Harry left the room and walked into the corridor. Turning to his left, he saw Padma being comforted by an only slightly more coherent Parvati. Lavender was holding onto both of them, but was not crying. She was simply looking at the far wall with no expression on her face at all. He decided the direct approach was the best approach.

"Ladies," he began. All three of them looked up at him. Padma had the same expression on her face she had when he'd met her in the corridor with Luna. Parvati looked as if she were about to wind up for an angry rant. Lavender was the one he was most concerned about. If anything, her expression became less expressive.

"Before you all go running off and making presumptions about what I want, where you fit into my life, and what it all means," he continued, "I would like to ask you a question."

Padma half-nodded at him, still crying. Parvati nodded, but he could see her left hand was clenched so tightly, her knuckles were white. Lavender had no outward reaction other than looking in his direction.

He took Padma's and Parvati's interlocked hands in one of his and grasped Lavender by the hand. He walked backwards, dragging them, or so it felt to him, back into the room. Once they were far enough in the room, Harry momentarily turned his attention to Steelgrip. "Could you please close the door, ensure no one leaves before I am finished, and ask that the packages be brought in now."

Steelgrip nodded and pressed a gem to seal the door.

Instead of calling for someone, Steelgrip reached into his valise and removed five identical boxes and placed them in a stack in front of him on the table.

"Don't try to leave. I need all three of you for this part," he said. Padma looked curious, Parvati still seemed angry and, of greatest concern, Lavender was still emotionless.

He let go of the girls' hands, picked up the boxes from the table and walked to Lavender.

"Please don't be offended. I am doing this in reverse order because the situation requires it and the conditions under which I planned this have changed," he explained.

He opened the box and knelt down. He took her hand in his and looked up into her eyes. "Miss Lavender Michelle Leigh Brown, although you have only truly known me these past two days, I feel I have known you all your life. You are important to me in ways I cannot tell you because I know not how to describe them in words," he said.

He watched as Lavender's eyes and face went from emotionless to shocked to surprised and now to something akin to awe. She wasn't hitting him with her fist yet, so he continued. "I love you and would ask you to be my wife, knowing this is with the full consent of Lord Brown and your parents. What say you, my beautiful and beloved?"

Lavender had thought Harry had changed his mind because of the intensity of the magic of his kiss with Luna. That had not, apparently, been a good conclusion. Instead, here was this wonderful boy. "No. Correction. Man," she thought. And he was asking her to be his wife now. "Was that a ring in his other hand?" she wondered.

"It would be a dream come true," she whispered, a little smile playing across her face.

Harry extended her ring finger and gently slid the ring onto her finger. It flashed for a moment and sized to fit her finger perfectly. She didn't even look at it, however. She only had eyes for the boy who would, in just a few minutes, be her husband.

He stood, gathering in his mind all of the complex emotions of belonging, love, togetherness, and marriage he was feeling, cupped her cheek, drew a loose lock of her hair back behind her ear, gently slid his hand to the back of her head and kissed her tenderly.

He broke the kiss and noted her eyes were still closed and the tip of her tongue was just visible through her parted lips.

He drew his wand and pointed it at himself then spoke. "I, Harry James Potter, Lord of House Potter, do swear upon my life and my magic that I will be a true and loving husband to Lavender Michelle Leigh Brown-Potter to the end of my days and that I will never knowingly, through action or inaction, cause her harm. So mote it be." Once again, Harry felt the pressure of his magic judging him, his intent towards Lavender. He watched as the green pulse of magic left him and washed over Lavender.

Lavender's eyes opened wide in surprise. She could now feel him. Could feel how he was feeling. Could feel how he felt about her.

Harry leaned in again and kissed her, projecting all of his feelings for her into the kiss.

If Harry hadn't been holding her up, she would have fallen down. Her knees nearly buckled at the overwhelming sense of loss, replaced by a sense of family, love, and a power radiating out of him she could not name. She knew he would do anything to keep her safe. She steadied herself and withdrew from the kiss, now certain he loved her. That was really all that mattered to her.

He rested his forehead against hers for a moment, looked into her eyes and asked, "Are you still upset with me?"

She drew back a bit and shook her head.

"Good. I have to take care of two others. Please go sit next to Steelgrip. He has something you need to sign before I can give Parvati her ring," he whispered to her.

She kissed him quickly, kissed Parvati, kissed Padma, and skipped over to Luna and kissed her. She then skipped over to Steelgrip, who had his arms protectively in front of his face. He said, likely loud

enough for the wizards and witches waiting in the queues in the lobby to hear, "Basajaun do not kiss or hug!"

Lavender sat demurely next to Steelgrip as the basajaun explained the document to her and handed her a quill. She looked at Parvati then quickly penned her signature.

Harry turned his attention to Parvati. He knelt, took her hand and looked into her smiling eyes. Since Parvati had some idea of what was to come, she was practically vibrating in place. Harry stood and put his forehead to Parvati's. He put his hands on her shoulders and whispered to her. "Slow your breathing down. If you hyperventilate and pass out, you won't get your ring today," he admonished her gently.

She closed her eyes and nodded, then calmed herself and began breathing more normally. She opened her eyes and looked intensely into Harry's as he knelt again.

"Miss Parvati Jeevankala Patil, while these past two days may seem like a lifetime to you, I knew you in a previous lifetime and loved you as a friend, knowing I could never have more. The fates have seen fit to allow me the opportunity to be so much more to you. I ask you if you will let me come to love the woman you will grow into. The consent of Lord Patil and Lady Patil have already been given. Will you be my wife?" Harry asked.

Parvati's smile was filling her face. "Yes! Yes! YES!" she shouted, bending down and kissing Harry.

Harry gently slid the ring onto her finger. It flashed and the ring sized itself to fit perfectly.

Once again, Harry swore to protect. Once more his magic judged him. Once more, a young woman could feel how he felt for her.

Parvati's eyes filled with tears. "Oh Harry!" she exclaimed emotionally as she pulled him to her. She kissed him gently. Tenderly. She was in no hurry. She now had this wonderful boy for the rest of her life. All she wanted in the moment was to communicate to him what she felt for him.

Harry was getting overwhelmed by the flood of mixed emotions rushing headlong at him. From Lavender was satisfaction and an overwhelming sense of belonging and happiness. Parvati was projecting euphoria, togetherness, and the love of children. "Thank goodness for the contraceptive potion!" Harry thought. Luna was projecting support and understanding.

Parvati pushed away and looked at him in concern. "Let me go take care of the paperwork. You take care of our Padma," she said.

He smiled and nodded. "I hope to do that from now until the end of time," he said.

"Silly!" she quietly exclaimed then turned and gave Padma a hug. She then walked to Luna and pulled her into a hug before pulling her over to the table to sit on the other side of her from Steelgrip.

Harry turned to Padma, but turned to look at Luna when he felt a spike of positive emotions from her. Parvati was listening to Steelgrip, poised to sign a document with the quill in her hand, but her other arms was wrapped firmly around Luna's shoulders. Luna had very nearly melted into Parvati's side.

He turned back to Padma, who was looking slightly guilty. "Harry, I'm..." she began, only to feel his finger on her lips.

"Were you going to apologise?" Harry asked knowingly. She nodded.

"For running away?" he asked. He withdrew his finger.

"For not waiting to hear your explanation, for running away, and for not trusting you, even though I promised I would," she confessed.

He kissed her forehead, then knelt and took her hand in his. "Miss Padma Anuradha Patil, you protected someone I love very much, even to your own possible detriment. You are beautiful, intelligent, talented, and quite possibly one of the most sensual kissers I have ever had the pleasure of kissing." He paused as her blush might have caused her legs to collapse for lack of blood. She looked into his eyes again. "I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, if you will have me. Lord Patil and Lady Patil have already given their consent. Will you be my wife?" he asked.

Padma knelt down to him and pulled him down to kneel on both knees. She sang for a moment, then took both of his hands and looked into his eyes. "Freely will I be your wife in love, magic, and marriage, from this day forward until our souls, still joined, take another turn on the wheel of life. I, Padma Anuradha Patil-Potter, do promise," she said.

Harry placed the ring on her finger. Neither of them noticed the flash as the ring sized itself to fit perfectly. Harry, without releasing Padma's hands, drew his wand and swore his protection of her. He felt his magic judge him. He watched as the green flash of magic enveloped her. He gathered all of his positive emotions of her and leaned forward to kiss her. As he was closing his eyes, he looked briefly at her bare neck, and that morning's events flashed into his mind and across their newly-formed bond.

Just as Padma felt Harry's lips touch hers, she felt an incredibly strong spike of lust fill her. She opened her mouth and moaned into the kiss, moulding herself to Harry's body, wrapping her arms around him tightly. She felt her whole body buzzing with desire.

Just as suddenly, she felt cold. She could see in her mind enormous mountains of ice collapsing. Huge cliffs of ice shearing off and crashing to the frigid waters below. She drew back quickly from the kiss, opening her eyes. She had gotten goose flesh on her upper arms and rubbed her arms to warm herself up again.

She looked at Harry, terrified.

"I'm sorry, My Love. I was trying to channel my emotions for you, and I just remembered how we awoke this morning, and what you smelled and tasted like, and well... I was trying my best to quell my excitement..." he trailed off in embarrassment.

"Oh thank goodness!" she exclaimed, and kissed him again, this time she thought about how much she had grown to love this boy in front of her.

Harry felt Padma's emotions wash over him. Her love for him was so pure. So fresh. It was like taking a shower in a deliciously warm tropical waterfall.

He opened his eyes and helped her to stand with him. She, however, had no intentions of breaking the kiss just yet.

She drew back. "Could you feel it?" she asked timidly.

"Yes, My Padma," he cooed at her, touching her cheek. He kissed her forehead then looked meaningfully over at Steelgrip. "Let's get the legal portion of this over so we can get back to some kissing," he said, smiling. "Could you send Luna over?" he asked quietly.

She hugged him and nodded, then skipped over to the table and gave each of the girls a hug from behind. She looked at him and whispered into Luna's ear. Luna looked at him curiously before standing and coming over to him.

"Padma said you needed something, Harry?" she asked, her curiosity in her voice. She was unconsciously wringing her hands together.

"My Luna," he said, "why are you so nervous?" he asked, feeling her tension and fear.

"Harry," she said timidly, "do you know what I see?" she asked. He shook his head.

"Grey mist," she replied, practically crying. "Whenever I see grey mist, something happens to me. I can't see past it until whatever it is happens. When Mum... when Mummy died. I couldn't see her. It was just swirling grey mist," she continued, staring passed Harry's shoulder, tears running down her cheeks.

She focused on him again. "I've seen you proposing to Padma, Parvati, and Lavender before. But I can never see past that point in time," she finished.

Harry nodded solemnly. "You know I knew you when you were older?" he asked. She nodded, looking away.

"Would you like to hear Hermione's and your theory on the meaning of the grey mist?" he asked. She looked at him intensely. He could feel his occlumency shields easily bypassed, as if they weren't even there. She nodded at him. He could feel her fear lessen.

"The grey mist you see is, or so the two of you theorized and I agreed, a point where an event is happening to you. Not necessarily bad, as some of the times it was only the possibility of something bad happening. Sometimes it was the possibility of something good. I hope this is one of those times when you saw it only because it was about you," Harry explained.

Her expression softened, and then she smiled at him.

"Now, as to something I need," he began. The curiosity once more crept into her face.

He knelt down, still holding onto both of her hands. "Miss Luna Selene Lovegood-Potter," he began. Luna looked as if she was about to interrupt him, but he wasn't having that.

"Shush you. You deserve this. You..." he began, but tears burned his eyes, "Luna, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here. This world would, in just a few years, be under the yoke of the dark lord and the death eaters. Hermione would..." his voice caught, but he owed her this, and so much more. "Hermione would be dead again without you. Either at the dark lord's hands or Weasley's. But, because of you, I am here. If that were the only reason I loved you, I could not, in ten thousand years or ten thousand lifetimes, repay you with enough love and kindness," he said.

He looked back into her eyes, "and so I ask, Miss Luna Selene Lovegood-Potter, for whom one of the most sacred portions of my soul is set aside, and for whom I owe a debt I shall never be able to repay. Lord Lovegood has granted his permission. Will you be my wife?" he pleaded, tears still running down his cheeks.

Luna knelt down, much as Padma had, and bade Harry to join her on both knees. "Harry James Potter, with all my heart do I join with you in love, magic, life, and marriage, to the very end of days, shall I be your loving wife," Luna said, intertwining her fingers with his. She leaned forward and kissed him, slowly blowing a breath of sweet peppermint into his mouth.

She pulled back and whispered, "From our first breath together, and unto my last breath shall I love you, Harry."



Harry thought this was somehow significant and mirrored it. He captured her lips and slowly exhaled into her mouth. When he pulled back, he whispered, "Even with my last breath shall I love you, Luna."

He gently disengaged his hands from hers and slipped the ring onto her finger. Once again, the ring flashed and fit perfectly on her finger.

So involved in one another, they did not realise the other three girls had been standing beside them and watching them.

When Parvati and Lavender saw the flash of magic, it caused both of them to look down at their own rings. They clearly announced their presence to Luna and Harry with a squeal that would have had dogs in Dover howling in pain and bleeding from their ears.

"Harry! This is gorgeous!" Parvati had squealed at the same time Lavender squealed, "Harry! This is huge!"

Padma had anticipated this happening and had her own hands on her ears when she had watched Parvati beginning to look at her own ring.

The rings were, even in terms of contemporary magical jewellery, exquisite pieces of craftsmanship, whose charms and protections were unequalled outside of Gringott's-provided wards.

All of the rings were similar. They were identical platinum bands. A perfectly-cut, five-carat round brilliant diamond floated above the surface of the platinum. Around this orbited a circle of spherically-cut diamonds, which tumbled and spun, catching the light, reflecting some of it, but carefully channelling light into the central diamond. Each platinum band had the girl's birthstone set, intermixed with diamonds of the same size, one-eighth-carat.

Padma was about to ask a question, but Harry seemed to either be reading her mind or had anticipated the question.

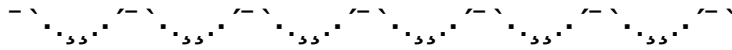
"The gems are all Basajaun-grown. Because of the jewel crafting magic involved, the gems will never lose their lustre, nor will they every come loose from the bands. The rings have a few special qualities I would like you to try to discover before giving away all of

their secrets," Harry explained, looking from girl to girl to see what their reactions were. He was pleased he could fairly well predict what they were.

Padma began examining her ring closely, trying to discern any possibility of visual hints to the secrets the rings might hold. Parvati and Lavender were still gushing about the size, complexity, artistry, and beauty of the rings, as well as Harry's generosity and his sense of fashion.

Luna, however, wasn't interested in the ring. She didn't look at the diamonds, the band, or any other aspect of the ring, except the giver.

Harry could feel the power coming from her. Luna was looking right into his eyes and he felt compelled to gaze back into her beautiful, pewter eyes.



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